Juditha Dowd

What She Wants

Peggy had never been what she'd call "crazy" about her husband. She presumed marriage would ignite the spark that eluded their courtship, but it didn't. Instead, they enjoyed a modest chemistry that dwindled as they aged. Not really something she dwelt on. Likely Tom hadn't either. But it comes to mind this evening when her granddaughter leans across a restaurant table and says, So Peen, were you and Grandy madly in love?

Minutes ago the threesome blew in from Columbus Avenue, shed their long scarves, and ordered the house red. Today is the final Sunday in the dance subscription, Peggy's annual Christmas gift. Walking from Lincoln Center they'd critiqued the performance, shouting to be heard above the wind. Too heavy on the romance—what Peggy's daughter, Ann, likes to call *the lost and found*. But the dancing, wasn't it amazing? The dancing . . . that's what Peggy's still thinking about as she smooths her gray pageboy, answers as though this were a normal question that no, they hadn't been madly in love. Summer and her mother exchange a look. But at the beginning, Summer persists, What was the attraction?

I can't remember, says Peggy, irritation creeping into her tone, perhaps just the residue of that Balanchine piece that ended the afternoon. An edgy piece, Summer had called it. We didn't click at first, she says.

Summer is all ears now. How come?

Well, it was a blind date—for dinner. Dinner was an occasion back then, you dressed for it. But Grandy came by an hour late wearing these gunky old pants—been working on his car, he said. No apology. Barely introduced himself. We ended up with hot dogs at a roadside stand—me in suede pumps and my best dress. I was quite put out.

Really, says Ann. I've never heard any of that.

Oh sure you have, says Peggy.

Then how did you end up getting married, asks Summer, amused.

Peggy sighs. Young people seem to hunger for this kind of stuff, but she would never have quizzed her own grandmother so boldly. Blind dates, she says. Why do people bother? But he called again. I agreed to give it another try.

Phew, giggles Summer. Close call!

It was, says Peggy. Lucky for you, huh?

The second time things had gone better. Dinner at a swanky

hotel over in Long Branch. Peggy says, Grandy was sweet. Nice-looking, too. Same deep-set eyes as your mom, that black hair . . .Well, you knew him of course.

The waiter brings their wine. Peggy sips slowly, feeling it warm her throat, then her chest. She'd like to just sit here for a couple of minutes more, enjoying it. But additional explanation seems warranted so she soldiers on, telling them how she and Tom found they had common interests, like classical music. They both loved the ocean, swam all that summer off Monmouth Beach. This was 1940, she says. The war was on in Europe, and some were saying we'd join it soon. Grandy would likely be drafted—

So he proposed, interrupts Summer.

In a fashion, says Peggy. Actually, he just started talking about 'when we get married,' and I said to myself, I guess we're getting married. She takes another sip of wine and glances from Summer to Ann.

Gees, Peen, says Summer. Here I thought you'd been high school sweethearts or something.

No, nothing like that, says Peggy. Tom had gone to prep school and on to Dartmouth, she explains. She'd gone to a public high school and taken a clerical job. Then suddenly she was pushing twenty-seven, as her mother kept reminding her.

Summer nods reassuringly. You were gorgeous, Peen. Every boy's dream, I bet.

Ann is frowning. Dad *loved* you, she says. Sure, there'd been spats, followed by the frosty silences her mother favors. And her dad's annoying whistle as he dressed for work, pretending nothing was awry. But the coffee he brought to her bedside every morning, so she could wake up slowly, the way she liked. Wasn't that love? She recalls the morning after his heart attack, the kitchen eerily quiet. Making coffee, trying to find the right mug. Then taking the stairs to the bedroom, gray in the pre-dawn light, her mother small against the pillows. She'd lifted a hand as if to refuse the tray before reaching out to accept it. Ann hadn't meant to startle her—perhaps for an instant her mother expected . . . Tom? To give her a moment, she tidied the room, pausing at his photograph on the bureau. There he was in his naval officer's uniform, his nose cute the way it had been before it got smashed in a wartime accident and reconstructed into what he claimed he'd always wanted—a man's nose. Dad, she'd thought for a ridiculous instant, How can you be dead?

I think your dad admired me, Peggy offers. That's love, isn't it?

What she came to feel for Tom should properly be called love too, Peggy thinks, though she's not about to discuss it tonight. If

not love, what? She has nothing to compare it to. She misses the fact of him, her husband. The life they built, the peace they eventually made. Even ten years after his death the house is lonely, especially around six when he used to pull into the driveway. First thing, he'd fix them a cocktail—martini for himself, whiskey sour for her—and the evening would take on a little drama as they sat by the picture window and observed the goings on. There had still been children in the neighborhood, playing in their front yards, riding bikes. One by one they'd be called in to supper. As darkness fell and the visible world shrank to the circumference of a streetlight beam, a feeling of well-being would often engulf her. If not exactly happiness, something akin. Had Tom felt that, too? She's often wondered.

Ann drains her wineglass. Dad *loved* you, she says again.

Of course he did, says Peggy, shifting to a more comfortable position in the banquette. Why bicker about something so silly.

But it bothers her, Ann's attitude. Divorced all these years, and somehow an authority on love? I've entered the World of Women, she recalls telling Ann as Ann was packing to return to New York after the funeral. Ann peered up with a puzzled smile. What world of women? *Widow*, Peggy had forced herself to say. I'm a widow. Ann nodded, but she didn't understand. What she'd had with Hardy, would you call that love? At first she and Tom wondered if Ann was pregnant, but no. Yet in a way it made sense, Ann a jazz fanatic, always drawn to musicians. Peggy smiles, remembering Ann's high school pal Athena, the two of them up half the night listening to—

What's so funny, Peen? Summer is tapping her shoulder.

Oh . . . I was just remembering that wonderful dancer—Olivier what's-his-name. The one your mom claimed had a sock in his tights?

Summer laughs, a crescendo of high-pitched bells. Olivier Dumas, Peen. Quite a guy, actually.

You girls, chuckles Peggy.

The waiter returns to recite the specials. She needs to focus. But already she's thinking about how she should have paid closer attention to Ann while she was at college. It was complicated, little Susan at a difficult age and Tom under siege at work. Distracted by their needs, worn out by hot flashes, she'd been less aware of Ann. And Ann perfectly capable at twenty-one of making her own decisions. But a forty-year-old saxophone player, twice divorced and all but itinerant. Not what they'd expected.

Need a few minutes? says the waiter.

Ann says, I think we're ready. . .

Do me last, says Peggy.

It had been strange, something infecting both daughters as they spun away from her, first Ann, then Susan, whirling like dervishes in a

trance. Where did it come from, that recklessness? I'm getting married, Ann informed Tom on the telephone, casual as a postcard. Tomorrow, at City Hall. When she finally brought Hardy home, he greeted them with what seemed to be amusement. M-aaah-m and D-a-a-d, he'd asked skeptically, as if experimenting with some new language. Or would they prefer Peggy and Tom?

I'll try the flounder, says Peggy.

Something to start, asks the waiter.

Summer points at the menu. Mom and I are getting the field greens with beets, goat cheese and balsamic.

Maybe just plain lettuce, says Peggy. Is there Thousand Island?

Mmmm, says the waiter. Lemme check.

The instant he retreats her daughter starts in again. Peggy's heart sinks. Ann is a dog with a bone—what's she after?

Ann says, Lately I've been wondering just how much life disappointed Dad. That awful job, the long commute. He was so irritable. It may have been depression.

Depression? Your dad was one of the more optimistic people I've ever met. (Sometimes Ann dumfounds her—didn't she know her father?) And he was devoted to his work. It nearly killed him when they cut head count, as they so brutally put it. He took that personally.

He sat at the kitchen table playing Solitaire, says Ann.

For heavens sake, Ann. Lots of people play Solitaire, it's not a disease. And he was just starting to get some of his old zip back when—

Ann shrugs. Just saying. . .

Give your father some *credit*! Peggy thunders—to her own astonishment. Downsizing, rightsizing, whatever they're calling it these days wasn't as common. His whole department, Ann. . . he knew those men, he felt responsible!

People at nearby tables are turning to look.

No options? offers Summer.

I guess so, says Peggy, lowering her voice. How can they understand what Tom was up against, what it meant to lose his job at sixty-two. He'd started there as an office boy—all he could get in the worst of the Depression—and grateful for it. Peggy cranes her neck, searching for the ladies room. But here's the waiter, back so soon, balancing salads up the length of his arm. Well look, she says, with a little rush of gratitude. They *do* have Thousand Island.

The windows are open wide to air out the house. It's late spring, the first nice weekend, and Peggy turns from the sink where she's been scraping and cutting carrots. Betty's having an affair, she says in a conspiratorial whisper.

Ann is at the breakfast bar. In-ter-est-ing, she says. Who?

A retired gardener. She met him at the old Strube estate. It's a county park now, volunteers restoring the formal beds. Quite the Lothario. *And* she's moving in with him. Can you imagine?

Ann pictures her mother's friend of forty years—tall, with a regal bearing, in contrast to her mother's softer prettiness.

Betty is positively *a-glow*, Peggy goes on. It's the nuttiest thing. Truth be told, she and Russ were never a good match. He can be an old stick-in-the-mud, Russ can.

Cheers for Betty then, says Ann. A last chance at happiness.

Peggy wraps the carrot sticks and puts them in the picnic basket with the sandwiches. You can't be serious, Ann, she says finally. Giving up everything . . . everyone? Betty is *seventy-five*. She's jumping off a cliff!

But if this is what she wants?

Betty doesn't know what she wants. I'm not sure she ever did.

That aside, says Ann, surely she doesn't have to give up *everyone*. Not you, Mother.

Peggy sets the cap on the iced tea jug and smacks it with her palm. Betty's going to Maine, she says. We're all supporting Russ. He's having an awful time.

Ann can see where this is headed. I'll check on Summer, she says. But here's Summer now, entering the kitchen in the green bikini bottom that matches her eyes, trailing the top by its string. She twists her hair into a knot and pours the last of the coffee. Peggy regards her half-clad figure with admiration. Taut and toned, a dancer's body. We made you a peanut butter and jelly, she says. Your mom and I are having deviled ham, I could easily make another.

Still vegetarian, says Summer. PBJ sounds delish. She moves a stool so she can stretch her leg on the breakfast bar. Slowly, she brings her head to her knee.

Peggy singsongs, wagging a finger—Dan-cers need their pro-tein!

Summer blows her a kiss. Peen, Peen, the sandwich machine! Are you guys ready? It's nearly noon.

We were waiting for you, says Ann. She's suddenly exhausted.

The beach lot is full. The only spot they can find is four blocks away. We might as well have walked from home, complains Ann, shouldering the umbrella and two folding chairs. Peggy is admiring Summer's blue toenail polish and pretends not to hear. The beach is already crowded. They settle by the high-tide line, where the sand is still damp. Fishing boats bob offshore. Summer tosses her ball cap and races in.

Put some of this on my back, will you, dear? says Peggy,

handing Ann the Coppertone. She scans the shoreline until she can see Summer stroking past the breakers, her copper hair plastered to her head and her green bikini bobbing up, then disappearing.

The scent of Coppertone evokes memories of all the summers they've spent at this beach. Ann spreads it over her mother's shoulders, lifting the straps of her bathing suit, leaning in to inspect an odd-looking mole by her neck—something she should mention but probably not now. How thin her mother's skin feels, like tissue.

Whoa! says Peggy, lurching forward in her chair. Big one! Ann follows her gaze—Summer has caught a wave. Remember how she and Dad loved to ride them, she says. Water rats, those two!

And look at her now, says Peggy. All grown up, a beauty. Where are the boyfriends?

She isn't dating much, says Ann.

What's she waiting for?

She's only twenty, Mother.

I know, but.

Summer's a dancer, she's not *waiting* for anything, says Ann. She pulls her straw hat low on her brow and picks up her book.

Peggy stares out at the fishing boats, follows the nearest as it moves off down the coast. What is the matter with Ann now? Well, *anyway* . . . she says finally, because somebody has to. Because if somebody doesn't Ann might sulk all afternoon. Have you talked to your sister lately? She's got herself a new beau, a good one this time from the sound of it.

What makes you think so?

Well, according to Susan he's a minister—one of those new denominations. No drinking, no drugs, of course. She's at church three nights a week—a little much, don't you think? And she's tithing, though with what she makes that can't be much. But she's *happy*, Ann. And she's let her hair grow in. She looks like Susan again.

Still waitressing at the Crab Hut?

Uh huh, says Peggy. Getting only Sunday nights right now. But with the weather warming up, things should improve. And you never know, maybe this new beau will—

What, marry her? snaps Ann. Mother, for crying out loud, what kind of solution is that?

Ann is due on the noon train. Peggy sips her coffee on the patio, where it's still cool. She's a little relieved her granddaughter isn't coming this time, much as she adores her. Otherwise she'd have to make eggplant parmesan again, heat up the kitchen. When it's hot she likes to grill outside, chicken or a small porterhouse. Anyway, once in a while it's nice to have Ann to herself. She rinses her cup at the kitchen

sink, pulls sheets from the dryer and brings them upstairs to Ann's old room. They're still warm, and on so humid a day the dry heat feels good against her seersucker robe, already damp with perspiration. Will Ann be more relaxed this time, she's wondering. Poor thing, her long hours filled these days with promoting some new genre at the publishing house. The latest boyfriend is history, of course, and with Summer out on her own it must get lonely.

On the way to the station she stops to buy tomatoes at a farmstand. When Ann's train is delayed she gets out of the car rather than idle the engine, though gas is cheap and all around her cars are humming. Once she'd harbored vague hopes for a more glamorous life, where perhaps idling your car for the air conditioning would seem like nothing. Now it simply seems the waste it is. She walks along the platform to where a beech tree spreads its shade. An ice cream cone, that's what she'd like. A vanilla cone from Dennison's luncheonette on Church Street, in the nearby town where she grew up. Dennison's is gone, of course, gone for decades.

Ann steps off the train looking wilted. She pecks her mother's cheek, slides into the passenger seat of the old Buick. Talk to me about when you were a dancer, she says, settling her overnight bag.

Peggy starts the car. I was never really a dancer, dear—not sure where you got that impression.

You were, says Ann.

A man I knew had a studio, that's probably what you remember. I'd taken a couple of lessons and we performed once or twice—it was just advertising for his dance school, that's all. Sorry, no Ginger Rogers.

There was more to it, says Ann. I recall your telling me Grandma made you stop. Wasn't it a Methodist thing?

Peggy heads out of the station lot and turns onto Corlies Avenue. Possibly, she admits. But things were changing. If our minister could sneak out for a smoke, dancing couldn't have been so terrible. She could tell Ann that once in a while she still puts on Duke Ellington and dances around the house like a fool, but what would that accomplish? With Ann you can't just do something, you have to immerse yourself. You have to drown.

Then why *did* you stop?

Oh, I think maybe the dance instructor had designs on me. He was older, not really the kind you'd go out with, you know? But obviously Ann doesn't know—she keeps ending up with these men. So Peggy says, To tell you the truth, Ann, I wasn't very good. That's the long and short of it. All the practicing, it's harder than you think. Look at Summer, and she still has to waitress.

Summer can't get enough, says Ann. Oh! I meant to tell you

first thing—they've scored a booking at BAM!

Peggy takes in a breath. That is *wonderful*, she says. Oh good for Summer. We'll have to get tickets! Is this what's sparked your interest in my brief spell as a hoofer?

No, it's something I'm editing right now, says Ann. A book about passion, what drives people to do what they do. Got me wondering about a lot of things.

Hmm, says Peggy. Speaking of passion, Betty's gone back to Russ. God love her, she got cold feet. The whole thing was so harebrained, wasn't it?

I was rooting for Betty, remember.

They're getting counseling now, says Peggy, making a left into the driveway. Can you imagine Russ in counseling? Poor Russ.

The house is dark and cool, a relief after the hot train. Ann sits beside the fan, lifting her hair and letting it fall around her neck, watching her mother divide tuna salad, tomato slices and lettuce onto plates. She opens a package of cloverleaf rolls and puts them in a basket.

So, if not dance, says Ann, taking her place across the narrow table, was there ever something else you once wanted so badly it hurt?

Hurt? I don't think so. Peggy butters her roll, buying time. She says, Like what for instance?

Something you just *had* to do or have. Anything. Passion, what I was talking about in the car.

Peggy worries the tuna with her fork. Of course she'd had dreams, who didn't? But what do you really *have* to have . . .

I did want to go to college, she says at last. We didn't have the money.

Wanted it that bad?

Well, at the time, says Peggy. She'd gotten over the idea, it wasn't the end of the world.

Something else then, says Ann.

Peggy taps a finger on her lips, miming *can't talk, mouth full*. She swallows before she's ready. Well, she begins uncertainly, when I was sixteen I wanted some silk charmeuse underwear. A bra and matching panties with lace trim, like my friend Irma had. She glances at her daughter. Is this what Ann is looking for? I *coveted* that set, she continues. Mom and I had taken the train to Newark. We were figuring out how to stretch the budget for school clothes. In one of those department stores that used to be on Market Street I saw it, the same thing Irma had, only a different color.

Ann smiles. I suppose you couldn't ask Grandma to buy them.

But I did, says Peggy. She grins mischievously, recalling the scene. Shocked myself because I knew there was no way Mom would

go for something like that. And they were *expensive*! But Mom said, Peggy, if we bought that set you'd have to do without something you *need*. And you'd have to wash them out every single night before you go to bed. Every single night. Peggy laughs, shaking her head. I'd have agreed to anything!

So then?

So then Mom marched up to the counter, pointed to the set, and said we'll take them. I don't think I've ever been happier in my life.

What color?

Mulberry. I *loved* that set, wore it to rags!

Ann is hugging herself, tilting onto the back legs of her chair. What was it that you had to go without? she says.

Careful, dear, one of those legs is loose, says Peggy, reaching out to steady the chair. I don't know, a sweater?

Ann can picture it: Her mother a dreamy teen, proper Grandma showing this unexpected side. She grins. She rights her chair and sets her elbows on the table, her face in her hands. Mother, she says, *good for you!*

Peggy feels herself tearing up. Where in the world did that come from? She leans forward until she can bump Ann's forehead affectionately with her own, the way they used to do when Ann was a little girl. Her girl. Now maybe they can just eat their lunch and—

Good, Mother, Ann repeats. She picks up her fork. She catches Peggy's eye. Okay, she says, and *what else*?