

## Greta Smart Figures It Out

**Diane Dunning**

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*Dunning shines in her ability to portray the insecurities and floundering that so often accompany young adulthood.*

Greta Smart faces romantic rejection, a threat to her livelihood, and the loss of a beloved family member in *Greta Smart Figures It Out*, Diane Dunning's engaging novella about a young woman's search for contentment and love. Along the way, Dunning explores the friendships, career opportunities, and rocky family relationships that form the foundation of Greta's life and future.

With the attention-getting opening line, "You're not beautiful," callously spoken by a blind date, we quickly learn of Greta's often disappointing search for a man who accepts her for who she is. A successful executive in New York City, Greta has a picture in her mind of exactly what type of man she wants. She is so set on her idea of a perfect romance with a perfect man, she nearly misses out on the one man who can truly fulfill her, even if he first seems like "the male equivalent of beige."

While Greta's search for romance plays a significant role in the book, her search for herself is the larger theme. The disastrous blind date is merely the beginning of her bad luck as she soon finds out she may lose her job and, worse, that her beloved grandmother is dying. A trip back home to Michigan proves illuminating in ways Greta never expects, not only offering her insight into her volatile relationship with her distant mother, but also showing her that lasting relationships are built on more than the superficial foundations she'd envisioned.

Dunning shines in her ability to portray the insecurities and floundering that so often accompany young adulthood. Greta is an imperfect but sympathetic character, trying to find her path to love and happiness even as she realizes there is no such thing as a perfect relationship or job. Her interactions with her often cold and unaffectionate mother are well developed, accurately representing both viewpoints.

The book progresses at a comfortable pace and each chapter is structured effectively, following Greta from New York to Michigan as she seeks contentment with her past and hope for her future. Her emotional journey becomes more enlightening as the story moves toward a satisfying, if slightly rushed conclusion. Characterization is generally well done, although Greta's emotional reactions occasionally wander into the histrionic zone; a great deal of sobbing occurs, and the excessiveness of the teary moments detract from Greta's otherwise resilient, independent character.

Dialogue is largely effective. However, there are a few incidents of head-hopping and a proclivity for excessive description and extraneous detail, most apparent during Greta's drive from New York to Michigan, which reads like a turn-by-turn map. The story's ending is rather abrupt, as is Greta's ultimate change of heart.

Dunning is also the author of *River Secrets* and *One Short Year*, a short story anthology which first introduced the Greta Smart character. While it could benefit from more polishing and an expanded conclusion, *Greta Smart Figures It Out* is a satisfying and entertaining novella.

JEANNINE CHARTIER HANSCOM (February 6, 2014)

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