

About AGAINST THE GRAIN

It's 1962 and a Black teenage girl, tracked into the secretarial curriculum, starts her junior year in high school. She lives in Jamestown, New Jersey, a leafy suburb of New York. Her school fails to provide even a typing class for her and sends her out for an after-school job instead. No one anticipates the conflict and change this precipitates, least of all the girl herself, Fleur Williams, whose family's status in town as the only Black Catholics in their parish has had the unfortunate effect of isolating her.

But others have a stake in how this rolls out. Elma Tanzer, the co-owner of the upscale jewelry store where Fleur is now employed, wonders how her customers and the Chamber of Commerce will react. Can the 1960s definition of gracious living extend in a new direction?

Helen Ransom, wife of the president of the local liberal arts college and seeking a new purpose in her life, makes a project of Fleur and her opportunities.

Russell Williams, Fleur's father, works for their town's sanitation department. His great efforts to provide a home for his family hardens him, and he cautions Fleur not to rely on white people for her future.

Father Halligan, pastor of Holy Trinity Catholic parish, believes he models superb leadership in how to negotiate the changing racial climate of the times, just as long as it does not disrupt "his" town and the careful nest he has built for himself.

And Mario Sposeto, a third-generation barber shop owner, wants little more than to be his own man in his own shop, cutting the hair of old men and young school children alike. But he believes the arrival of the Black girl in the Tanzer's store was when all the trouble began. No one gets to tell him what to do, he'll cut the hair of whomever he pleases.

Every small act of history is a drama of time, place, and people. Against the backdrop of civil rights actions and historic flashpoints in the early 1960s, Jamestown, New Jersey wrestles with a small act of desegregation that grows into something bigger. AGAINST THE GRAIN follows these six characters over two years, as events larger than themselves propel each of them into conflict and change.

Excerpt from AGAINST THE GRAIN by Anne Dimock

She glanced up and saw her own reflection in the glass window, a large-eyed Fleur superimposed upon the field of gold and silver, floating above it all. She caught her eyes in her reflection and thought, *Hello Fleur*. It seemed like the right thing to do, to greet herself as she was about to enter the store. She blinked and moistened her lips, and entered.

A bell jangled, but for a few moments she was alone. She looked around and took in all the display shelves—china vessels of all sorts, crystal goblets, and vases. So many candlesticks. Jewelry and watches on one side, pearls and engagements rings on the other. She looked into the adjoining room and saw tables laden with plates and glasses and silverware in such elegance as she'd never seen before. It only took a few seconds to take it all in, this small store with all its shelves and tables and cases, but she swept her eyes front and back and left and right and was completely, utterly dazzled. A middle-aged woman came out from the back and asked, "May I help you?"

A startled Fleur turned around and opened her mouth, but nothing came out. The woman asked, not unkindly, "Can I help you with something?" Again, nothing came out of her mouth. Now another older woman came out from the back, and she and the first exchanged a glance. The older of the two approached a few spaces and said in a German accent, "It's alright, dear, tell us what you're here for." Fleur stammered, "Mr. Tanzer called for a new girl."

The woman's natural smile faded and she looked at the other, who ducked back into the workroom. She returned quickly and said, "Mr. Tanzer will be right out," exchanging another silent communiqué. In a few seconds, Mr. Tanzer appeared, and as he shuffled out and took the

jeweler's loupe off of his eyeglasses, his eyes widened and mouth parted and he stammered in heavily accented German, "Hello, hello. I'm Mr. Tanzer. You must be . . ."

"Fleur Williams, sir."

The words "Fleur Williams" floated between the two women. The younger one recognized the name, the face, the family, and the young girl standing before them. She spoke first, "You must be Mathilde's girl."

"Yes, ma'am. I am."

"I'm Joyce Dunn. You may know Tommy and Marie from school."

"Oh, you're Marie's mother? I'm glad to meet you!" Marie had been in Fleur's class at the Catholic elementary school.

Joyce explained, "Fleur's mother is Mathilde Williams in our church. She's very active with the women's group."

"Oh, very nice. And where does your father work?"

"He works for the town, sir." She knew how to not say her father was a garbage man.

"Oh yes, very nice. Well, Fleur, we need an extra girl here now, to help out Mrs. Tanzer, Joyce, and the others and do lots of things we can't get to when the customers are here. Have you ever worked before?"

"All this summer, sir. I worked at the laundry."

"Very good, hard work that, I imagine. Can you stand on your feet all day?"

"Oh yes."

"Can you . . . ? Dust?"

"Pardon?"

"Dust. Clean. Sweep a little."

“Oh yes, sir. I can do that.”

“Very good, well then. Can you work every day after school?”

“Every day?”

“And Saturdays?”

“Every Saturday?”

“Yes, all day on Saturdays. We start to be very busy in November, and December is the busiest of all.”

Joyce smiled an encouraging smile at Fleur. Mrs. Tanzer remained impassive and thin-lipped.

“Yes, I think so.”

“You’ll make \$1.15 an hour. When can you begin?”

“I need to talk with my parents.”

“Of course, of course, yes, talk to them. Do you want me to call them?” asked Mr. Tanzer.

“Oh no, I’ll talk to them. Does that mean you want me to work here?”

“Well, I don’t see why not. Do you, girls?” he turned to his wife and Joyce, who in turn muttered yes, of course, so lovely. Fleur regarded them all and did not detect mockery, did not see smirks or daggers in their eyes. She did not know yet how to discern motives, did not understand about employment law, she was too young and trusting. But most of all, when she looked at their faces, she saw eyes that were wide like her own. She saw they were in some small way a little taken aback, just like her. She sensed a change within herself, and for the first time that day, Fleur smiled.

“Yes, I’d like to work for you, Mr. Tanzer.”

“Good, very good. When can you come back? Tomorrow? Can you come tomorrow?”

“Yes. The school will let me go early on Tuesday and Thursday; I can be here by 2:30.”

“Wonderful. Well then, Fleur. We will see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, sir. Thank you, ladies. Thank you, thank you. Oh, I’m a little excited!” And she smiled an embarrassed smile, but her heart opened inside, and that somehow showed in her bright face. “Thank you. I will see you all tomorrow.”

Fleur turned around and walked right into one of the display cases, rattling the china upon it, dangerously but without any breakage.

“Careful, careful,” Mr. Tanzer said as he gently steered her around the case toward the door. He opened the door for her and led her out, closed the door and walked back to where Mrs. Tanzer and Joyce were silently standing.

“Well, what do you think of that?” he asked them.

They looked at Mr. Tanzer and at first said nothing at all. For where should they begin?

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