

Jamie Cat Callan
from *Welcome to the Winter Club*

Wafer cones begin breaking, snapping in your hand. Even the sugar cones are crumbling. Ice cream is mysteriously losing its staying power. The hot fudge has gone gooey and cold. You're out of chocolate shots. The strawberry syrup is running low. No one knows where the bananas are kept anymore. Jolly is screaming at you from the grill, "Pick up! Pick up! Pick up!"

And Amy Whittlemen is at the end of the line. She's standing up straight now, fingering the little gold sliver of a cross around her neck, licking her pouty cherry-stained lips with that wet pink tongue of her's, smiling at you with those blue-blue eyes, and rubbing sand off of her left shoulder.

You are not sure whether you want to kiss her or kill her. And then suddenly, there she is, standing right before you in the bright light of Jolly's Soda Fountain. Pure and white and sweet and clean, she practically floats. And the cone suddenly snaps right in your hand. The vanilla scoop violently bursts out, shooting a huge spurt of ice cream onto the floor, leaving you with melted vanilla dribbling haphazardly, embarrassingly down your right wrist.

The little kid with the grubby paws, extended in front of you, waiting for his cone, starts wailing, "Mommy! Mommy!"

And his mother with the sagging brown belly gives you this look. "Can't you make a decent ice cream cone?" she asks. And you can't give her any lip, because she's a friend of your grandmother's and practically runs the Junior League.

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There is laughter at the end of the line, and Bob Shea arrives and you look up and then down at your hand, still wet with ice cream, then up again. And they are gone. Amy Whittlemen is gone.

In the meantime, the 5:07 train is rumbling past the salt marshes outside of Rowayton, Darien, Noroton Heights, Westport. Your father is having trouble breathing. Maybe it's the heat. Maybe it's something else.

At home, your mother is waking up from her nap. She is smoking a cigarette in the bathroom. She is perched on the windowsill, naked now, arms extended out the open window, long thin stream of smoke spilling out and disappearing into space. Your grandmother is downstairs making peach cobbles. Your sisters are in the Five and Dime, buying Barbie accessories. Your father is having trouble breathing. He is huffing and puffing. He is unbuttoning buttons. He is taking off his tie. He is unbuckling his belt. Nothing is helping. He cannot breathe.

And Amy is gone. Gone. And Bob Shea is gone. They're gone together.

No. Amy is back. And she's alone. She's standing right in front of you. Hair tangled and blonde. Tan. Belly flat. Blue-blue eyes. Gold cross at neck. And breasts. Breasts. Breasts. Two of them. Creamy and brown. Mocha.

She is staring at you. She is spitting out words. What are they?

"Hey, Tommy, what's the matter with you anyway. Are you like a *retard*?"

"Wha—what do you mean?" you ask, the vanilla now drying stiffly in the palm of your hand.

"I mean this line—what's the deal?"

"I'm all alone here," you say. "I mean, there's no help today. I'm on my own."

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Amy Whittlemen lowers her eyes, then opens them wide and stares right into you. She puts one hand on her hip and brings the other hand up to her gold cross around her neck. She fingers it and then cocks her head to one side. “Tommy,” she whispers, leaning forward, letting go of the hip and the cross. She places her elbows on the counter and extends her legs straight out behind her, her bottom pushed up, the small of her back curved, her breasts lowered down so far in front of you, as if she were offering them up to you on a communion platter.

A guy with his suit jacket slung over his shoulder and his hat tipped way back on his sweaty forehead shouts from the end of the line, “Hey man, what’s the deal?”

“Come on! Please,” a woman in a faded green bathing suit moans.

“I want ice creeeeeaaamm!” a toddler screams.

“Tommy,” Amy whispers. “I’ll give you a kiss if you give me a strawberry cone.”

“She cut!” someone shouts.

“Yeah!”

“It’s not fair!”

“Tommy,” she whispers more urgently this time, touching the tips of your fingers with the tips of her fingers, sending an electric current up your hand, your arm, under your chest, down through the right side of your body, into your heart, blood pumping to your groin.

“Tommy,” she whispers again.

“No,” you say. You are holding your ground. You tell yourself this is a matter of principle. What is right and what is wrong. Democracy. The American Way. The rights

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of the people. You know your Pledge of Allegiance. You've asked yourself what *you* can do for your *Country*, and not what your *Country* can do for *you*.

Amy Whittlemen has a pink tongue and she is licking the tip of her two front teeth. And the sight of it, this tongue, those teeth are driving something in you, something pulsating and big and forceful, steady and rumbling straight ahead on a steel track.

And on the 5:07 train out of Grand Central Station, your father is gasping for breath.

But, Amy Whittlemen is leaning forward, her bare thighs pressed up against the counter.

Your mother is pouring herself a glass of 7up.

Amy Whittlemen is holding her ground before you.

And your grandmother is standing by the oven. The thick smell of burnt sugar and peaches fills the kitchen.

And Amy Whittlemen will not take no for an answer.