

# Big C and Lil Puppet

*by* Amanda Nazario

At that time I was meeting Jacob at 3:30 each afternoon in Joan of Arc Park so we could walk dogs together. This was our job.

Jacob, a burly, petulant boy of 19, was my best friend then. With ten years separating us, we made an impressive couple—he in his dirty leather coat, I in my red corduroys carrying a messenger bag, each of us with two or three leashes in hand walking dogs. After we got done, he sometimes brought his notebook out of his backpack and read me his poems, still while walking. “The truth is in the lyrics, not the audio,” he told me, reading from the page, in a booming voice that was too old for him. Tramping on 93rd Street up the hill to the subway, hearing this, made me feel like I was living in some kind of monastery. I had no idea what kind of monastery it would be, where the monks studied pop culture, dog walking, and drugs—I knew only that I fit in there, that I liked it.

“That line is powerful, Jake,” I’d tell him as we crossed Broadway. Nannies glared at us as they pushed their strollers past. “Are you, like, a mystic?”

“Shut it, Fernie.”

“You shut it.” But I’d pull him in for a hug, right there in the street.

That day, as we came out of a building together, we noticed something unusual and hilarious. “Titan is an asshole,” Jacob was telling me, hauling on the leash of the English Mastiff puppy to get him out the door. “He took like an hour to come out of his crate. I wanted to punch him in the head.”

My favorite dog, Riley, was sitting at my side. “Whoa,” I said,

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pointing. "What's that say?"

Someone had vandalized the mailbox at the corner of the block. In silver spray paint, they had written "BIG C." When we walked over to investigate, we found that the other side of the mailbox said, in the same silver paint, "LIL PUPPET."

"That's the worst tag I've ever seen," said Jacob. I agreed: the letters were simple, unadorned; too plain to be graf art but not hard or crude enough to be gang graffiti. Instantly, Big C and Lil Puppet had our disdain.

Furthermore, we saw them everywhere. All around the ten-block area that covered our dog walking beat, up and down Riverside Drive, the tags were spraypainted on park signs, benches, and directly on the sidewalk. In each locale, the vandal had made sure to write both names: BIG C on one side, LIL PUPPET on the other.

We began to do improv about Big C and Lil Puppet. "I need to speak to Big C immediately," Jacob would say.

"I'm sorry," I'd reply, "Big C is in the managers' meeting. Would you like his voicemail?"

"No I wouldn't, dammit! Is Lil Puppet available?"

"Sir, Lil Puppet won't be in until tomorrow."

"So put me through to Lil Puppet's cell! Am I speaking to a retard here?"

Above our heads, the bronze Joan of Arc statue stabbed the sky.

This was when I was infatuated with a guy named Pete, whom I met in fancy restaurants for drinks at the bar. It was nice to have an

excuse, at the end of each dirty day, to wash the dog hair off, get dressed pretty. Pete wasn't serious about me—I knew this—but he had nice forearms and it was better than being alone.

Titan squatted to take a shit. After Titan's shit mound was picked up and disposed of, Jacob put his arm around me. "Have there been any developments in the Pete situation?" he asked.

Sardonically, I said, "I think he's proposing soon. Every successful man wants to take a dog walker as his bride, right?"

"You never know," Jacob said. "You might become Lil Puppet to his Big C."

I made a face at him. "But that's what I am," I said. "His Lil Puppet."

Jacob said, "You mean because he fists you?"

Riley rubbed his face against my leg. I petted Riley.

"Things with Lyssa are stabilized, not that you asked," said Jacob. Lyssa was Jacob's girl, who had moved to New York with him down from Poughkeepsie. "We're doing shrooms this weekend."

I said, "Does that mean you love her now?"

"No, I'll never love her," he answered. "Of that I'm certain."

I got angry whenever he said that, because he was always completely sincere about it. "So what the fuck are you doing, Jake? Don't you deserve to be happy?"

"I am happy," he said. "Happy-ish. I just don't love her."

"You're so stupid," I said. I pushed his arm off me and we stood toe to toe.

"Why, Fern?" he bellowed, cheeks reddening under his week of beard. "Are you saying you love Pete?" He shoved me away so hard I lost my balance, then stomped ahead. For the first time since I'd met Jacob, I felt uneasy near him.

In silence, we passed the front door of an apartment building that had BIG C written on the front, LIL PUPPET scrawled near it next to the intercom. Titan and Riley trotted beside us calmly. "You know so much about life, don't you," I finally spat at Jacob's back.

"So much it scares me," he said, with no sincerity at all.

