

# Lovebirds

Category: Stories

written by As told to Kristen Lee | February 14, 2020



*Editor's Note: During a summer internship with Pulse, medical student Kristen Lee had the opportunity to interview Mr. C, who comes to a Bronx family health center for medical care. He was accompanied by his wife, who never goes to the doctor for herself but frequently joins her husband to make sure that he's giving his doctor accurate information. They are both immigrants to the Bronx—he from the Dominican Republic and she from Puerto Rico. Their immigrant story is uniquely theirs and also typically American. See their photo at the story's end.*

**Mrs. C:** I've known him for forty-five years. That's how long we've been married. I was old when we got married, like thirty-three. He was seven years younger than me, but we're still here. We met when I went to the Dominican Republic. My big sister was married to a Dominican guy; that guy was close to him. And he told him that to get to the US—

**Mr. C:** We met through our families.

**Mrs. C:** I'm telling you the truth: We married like a business. But look where we are. He wanted to come here, so he married me like this (*snaps her fingers*).

**Mr. C:** The relationship between her and me is very nice to make a history

about. I ought to make a book, because it's nice. Beautiful lady. Everything is communication.

**Mrs. C:** He told me, "I need to get there, because I am poor. I need to help my family."

**Mr. C:** It was strange that a lady would be thirty-three years old, beautiful and still working. That means something for me. A lady like that? It's good. It was nice, real nice. I still love her.

**Mrs. C:** Yeah, he chose me, and we're still together. See. It works. He supports me, and I support him.

**Mr. C:** It takes respect, good discipline, too.

**Mrs. C:** Yes, yes, right.

**Mr. C:** I listen to you, you listen to me.

**Mrs. C:** And working. Companionship, you know. No turning around.

**Mr. C:** I'm very lucky, I got a good wife. A very healthy lady.

**Mrs. C:** The last time I went to a doctor was when I had my second child. My son is forty-one now. I had a cesarean section for both children. The next day, when I got home from the hospital, I got down on the floor and cleaned the bathtub. My father always told me, "You are very, very healthy." Whenever I feel bad, I say, "It's going to go away by itself."

**Mr. C:** It's very strange, right? A strange way to think.

**Mrs. C:** I don't have to take aspirin. I don't have to put on any BenGay. I hate the smell of BenGay. I take vitamins, though, and I give them to him, too.

**Mr. C:** Too many vitamins. One, two, three, oh!

**Mrs. C:** Vitamin B12, B10. Zinc. Zinc is good for the mind, right? He tells me many times to go to the doctor. I tell him, "Shut up." My daughter tells me, too. She works in the hospital. She's a technician. And she always asks, "How are you feeling? Are you feeling dizzy?" She tells me to go to the hospital, so she can check me with the ultrasound. But I always say, "No, I'm okay, leave me alone." My son, though, is like me. He doesn't go to the doctor. He's bipolar, and he doesn't want to take medications. He says he wants to be the way he is. I feel bad, because I would like that he takes medications, so he could be like you or me. But I don't like when doctors give *me* medicine.

**Mr. C:** She don't trust nobody.

**Mrs. C:** When I get medicine for something, I get cured for that thing—but then that medicine forms something else. Forty-one years, I don't see the doctor.

**Mr. C:** How do I feel about that? If she's happy, then I'm happy. But I love going to the doctor. You know, people learn from the doctor.

**Mrs. C:** Listen, when I tell him I have pain in my knee or my ankle, he says, "Oh, let's go to the doctor!" I don't. But I don't let him miss his appointments. I don't know, maybe I care more for him than for myself. My sisters tell me, "Ah, you worry too much about him!" That's the way I am. Any problem he has is *my* problem, too, because he's my husband. I don't have no problem—I keep walking, eating, sleeping. Why go to the doctor?

**Mr. C:** Lucky lady. Seventy-three years old.

**Mrs. C:** Seventy-six!

**Mr. C:** Seventy-three, oh my god.

**Mrs. C:** He always says seventy-three—I'm seventy-six. Maybe he don't like that. He's seventy, right?

**Mr. C:** Not yet—next year I'll be the complete seventy. But I feel like I'm

forty-five. No pain, no problems. Everything in my mind is clear. I come over here when I was twenty-four years old. My wife, we be together. We have two children, one girl and one boy—

**Mrs. C:** Forty-one and forty-two.

**Mr. C:** Good life, good quality. That's what I feel. Everything nice. (*Turns to wife.*) I love you. I love everybody. "This fellow, he's a good guy." I love when people say I'm a good guy.

**Mrs. C:** Yeah, he's too good to people. He always giving money, clothes, food.

**Mr. C:** Because if you receive something good, you have to help the people on the bottom, because God helps you.

**Mrs. C:** Do you understand what he's saying? When you see people down there, on the bottom, you have to help them. I lived in this country before him. I was born in Puerto Rico. And then I came here when I was fourteen, and I worked from that day until 2013, when I retired. You see? I made a mistake, retiring at seventy-one. I could still be working—and I wanted to keep working; I'd feel much better. Work makes you better in the head, and in your body, too.

**Mr. C:** But nothing is forever. Suppose you learn to be a doctor—but one day you'll have a family, and you'll want to change a little bit. Suppose in ten, twenty years, you don't want to keep doing that all the time. We have to change. That's life. You're in this space, tomorrow you're somewhere else. And then the next day you ask, "What is the purpose to live?" But she doesn't want to change.

**Mrs. C:** I did already—I'm not working. You know something? I dream every week that I'm working. Like a machine, like crazy! Because I love it.

**Mr. C:** She enjoys what she does.

**Mrs. C:** Every day, I watch the news, sweep my house, mop my house, do my laundry. And then I take a long walk. I live on the sixth floor—every floor has sixteen steps. I go up without stopping. It's okay, right?

**Mr. C:** It's very good.

**Mrs. C:** That's made my head very strong. I'm in good shape. If I don't go out one day, I say, "Okay, let me go downstairs and go to the mailbox and then go up without stopping." And I go (*huffs and puffs*) a little—but as soon as I get back, I'm fine. And when I'm cooking, a little bit of salt. A little bit of oil, a little bit of coffee, a little bit of sugar. Everything a *little* bit. Nothing very much, because too much salt is no good. Sugar is no good. Grease is no good. And I use brown sugar, brown rice, beans. I'm very careful when I'm cooking; he's never been in the hospital with a heart attack.

He only went to the hospital for one operation. He had just come from the Dominican Republic. I saw something funny on his head, and he told me he had had a motorcycle accident there—he crashed into a tree—and they took him to the hospital, unconscious.

**Mr. C:** A driver in a car mixed beer and hard alcohol. I put down my brake, and then I lost control, and *fwah, boom!*

**Mrs. C:** The DR emergency-room doctor told him, "You have to stay three days." And he said, "No, the hospital is too dirty, the bed is too dirty, I have things to do." So he left the hospital and came to the US.

**Mr. C:** For two weeks and a half, I didn't have any control when I was cutting

hair. A customer said, "Oh, you cut too much here." And I knew that, so I didn't charge him.

**Mrs. C:** The problem was, he was acting very funny for weeks.

**Mr. C:** Let me tell you something she doesn't know. The problem was, in the DR, I owed \$5,000 to someone who worked with me there. After I started cutting hair in the US, in one month, I made \$5,000. My responsibility was to make that money to send to the guy, because I owed him. When I say, "In three days, I will pay you back," I will do it. I'm a very responsible person. That might be the reason I'm still alive—

**Mrs. C:** Excuse me. He was thinking about the money, but he wasn't thinking about his head. He had a hematoma, a blood clot. He was about one hair from dropping dead. You know what they told him in the hospital here? "You are a very, very lucky man, and very strong." They rushed him right away to an emergency surgery, and that's why he's alive.

**Mr. C:** The doctors said, "My friend, people die in motorcycle accidents less severe than yours. You don't feel afraid to die?" I can't die at the present time, because God tells me that lots of people depend on me and my services. I'm not a person who's ready to go from this world.

**Mrs. C:** He says he's going to live to be 101 years old because of his mind. Very strong.

**Mr. C:** When I came from the DR, I had to work—

**Mrs. C:** You had to go to the hospital, but you didn't.

**Mr. C:** Something bothered me here, I owed a friend of mine \$5,000.

**Mrs. C:** *Cuckoo, cuckoo.* That's a cuckoo mind.

**Mr. C:** After I made the money, I said, "Let me go to the hospital." I'm a lucky, lucky guy.

**Mrs. C:** When he went to the hospital, they immediately put him in a wheelchair and (*claps*) prepared him for the operation.

**Mr. C:** The doctor said, "Two weeks' bed rest."

**Mrs. C:** No, six weeks.

**Mr. C:** I said, "But I'm feeling strong, I want to go to the barbershop and cut hair."

**Mrs. C:** You can write a book about it.

**Mr. C:** Because if I'm feeling strong, why do you tell me not to do something? I'm not that kind of person.

**Mrs. C:** The doctor said, "You need six weeks to recover."

**Mr. C:** I didn't feel like I had to take a rest. I wanted someone to tell me, "Go! Stand up and go to work!"

**Mrs. C:** He didn't take the two weeks. Not even one week.

**Mr. C:** I don't want to be soft. I'm a man.

**Mrs. C:** You see how he is? He doesn't like to be lazy. He works seven days a week.

**Mr. C:** All the time.

**Mrs. C:** He doesn't take one day off.

**Mr. C:** For me, cutting hair for ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to do it. I see your hair, I see where you've got something wrong, because I'm good. I don't have to think; everything is automatic.

**Mrs. C:** He's been cutting hair since he was seven years old.

**Mr. C:** I went to barber school from 1974 until 1976—188th Street, second floor. My teacher was an Italian guy—Mr. Nick and Miss Gloria. I've been cutting ladies' hair for thirty-five years. But I've been cutting men's hair

for fifty-eight years. I've got two licenses, in cosmetology and as a barber. I'm the master.

**Mrs. C:** He's like Trump. Arrogant.

**Mr. C:** Well, I'm not arrogant. I'm a positive person, that's a word I like. Not arrogant.

**Mrs. C (to the interviewer):** *Mira*, look, you're having a good time with this couple, right? The odd couple!

**Mr. C:** I wanted to move to New York for the possibility to grow. I opened three salons. I made money. Now, in the DR, I have two houses on a big property, and I want to go back with my wife to die. I have ten beautiful pumps filling the pools with water. I've got lots of shrimp, lots of fish. I've got twenty kinds of trees. Fruit. That's what I love. My wife doesn't understand that.

**Mrs. C:** I like this country, that's what I know. In this country, I can go by myself anywhere.

**Mr. C:** I have to go back to spend my money, invest in more apartments to rent in the tourist area. It's my dream. She likes to put the money in the bank, and she thinks I'm cuckoo because I don't. In July, I will complete forty-nine years in this country. I want to go back to the DR with seventy years. I want to be in good shape. I want to die doing something important.

**Mrs. C:** Exercising on your own property.

**Mr. C:** *Sí*, yes. That's my dream. I work so hard for that. But she doesn't like that. She doesn't like the trees or the grass, anything like that.

**Mrs. C:** I've been in this country since I was fourteen. I can go through the streets, take long walks. Take the train, the bus, go home whenever. I don't have to worry. But over there, I don't know. And everybody scares me: "Oh, this and that is going on there, and you cannot wear this, and you cannot wear that."

**Mr. C:** There's no reason to think like that, because when I go over there, I'll get a little car that's beautiful and clean. We'll go anywhere you want to go.

**Mrs. C:** People are working all over that property in the DR. I'd have to see people every day, and some days, I don't want to see nobody.

**Mr. C:** I invested all my money in that property.

**Mrs. C:** I can talk about the way he spends his money, like this (*snaps fingers*).

**Mr. C:** Okay, okay.

**Mrs. C:** He talks about the way I save my money. When I die, that money's going to belong to him.

**Mr. C:** I've got tilapia, lots of tilapia. I don't like to grill it—I like to sear it.

**Mrs. C:** Whenever a fish is dead, he takes it and he cooks it.

**Mr. C:** If I rent my property to tourists, they can catch a fish. And if they want, we'll cook it for them. If not, they can drop it back into the water. I've got a swimming pool for her that I tried to fix.

**Mrs. C:** You know what his problem is? He lives in this country, right? But this (*points to his head*) is in his own country, in the Dominican Republic. How can he live like that? No good. You have to keep your mind where you are.

**Mr. C:** I have dreams to go back to my own country. She says, "Why you think like that? You're in New York." Yes, but I've got plans to go back to my country, to die there, on my property. To see fish jumping in the water,

swimming. Like Tarzan in the jungle.

**Mrs. C:** Tarzan in the jungle?

**Mr. C:** That's my dream.

**About the *Encounters* Project:**

*Pulse's* Visuals Editor Sara Kohrt collaborated with two medical students from Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Kristen Lee and Erin McCoy, to launch a project intended to add more patient voices to *Pulse*. Kristen and Erin photographed and interviewed patients who were waiting to see their doctors at a Bronx family health center. The patients were asked to talk about their healthcare experiences, to share stories about their lives outside the clinic walls and to reflect on how these two worlds affect each other.

**Visuals Editor:**

Sara Kohrt