

## Wonder Woman

She told me her name was Wonder Woman.

No you're not! She's skinny and you're fat! I was ruthless as a child. It's hard not to be when your parents are separated and you don't know why. Plus, she had a heavy Spanish accent. I was no fool. She had large brown tortoise glasses and bushy bangs that looked like wild squirrels were scurrying across her forehead. But she insisted she was Wonder Woman so much so, we called her "Wonder" for years. My grandmother who didn't speak a lick of English even called her Wanda. Of course in a heavy Chinese accent that mi madre could never understand. It was better that way.



## Powerplant Tryst

When my father and Wonder first started going out, they would meet in his red Dodge 75 on the corner of 14th and 1st right beside the electrical power plant. The red car felt like a traveling no tell motel. It was large. Dirty. And yet, it always smelled like pine cones from the pine tree air freshener my father hung up like mistletoes. My brother and I had so much room to play in the back. We practiced kung fu moves, performed magic tricks, and we never ever wore our seatbelts. Til this day, I refuse to wear a seatbelt sitting in the back. The powerplant was their version of the romantic dark alley. I remember being mesmerized by the clouds of smoke blowing out of what looked like giant cigarettes. My brother and I would sit in the back entertained by this awesome sight while my father snapped his Hubba Bubba gum loudly, all while waiting for Wonder.



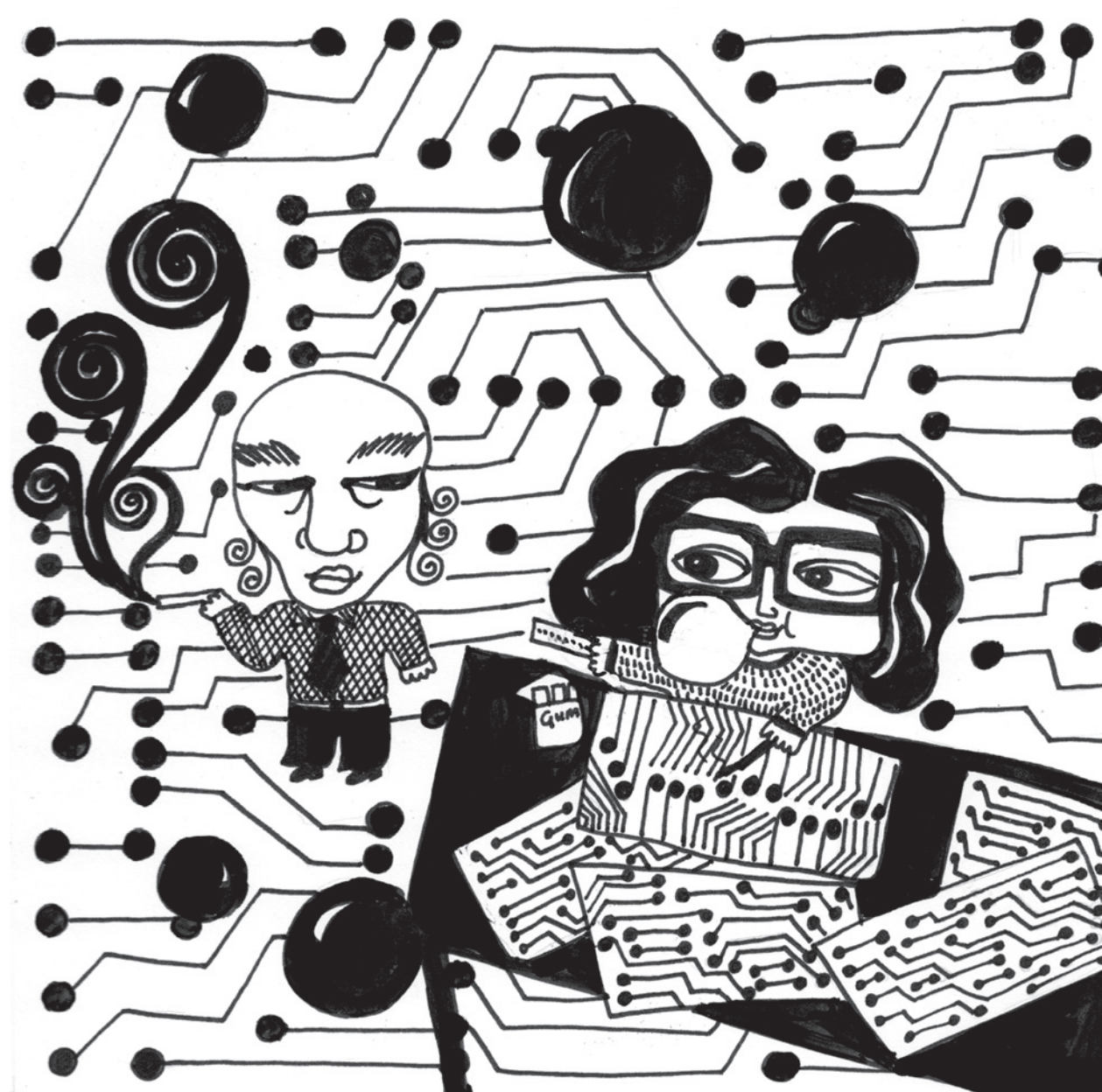
## The Seduction

Mi madre and my father met at work, at an electronics manufacturing company. My father was the head of quality control and my mother was a soldering specialist known for her killer circuit board skills.

Those days, my father smoked like a chimney sometimes polishing off two packs a day. My mother wanted him to quit because she hated how cigarette smoke got trapped inside his polyester suits. She said he smelled like wet doggy.

To help him quit smoking, she would offer him a piece of gum whenever he came over to review her work. She kept a stash in her pocket book, and a little mirror near her desk to monitor his arrival. The rest is history.

My mother always said it was their signs that brought them together. Not the smoking. I mean how could a Leo resist an Aries, she'd say. Of course, she was the Aries.



## Wonton Noodle Soup Along the East River

Inside the car, we always came prepared with piping hot food from Chinatown. Wonton noodle soup for everyone and coffee for Wonder. We'd drive to the nearby East River, back when it was a garbage dump filled with ravenous seagulls who made a game out of pooping on our car while we slurped up noodles. Afterwards we would make a game out of who could toss our empty wonton containers farthest into the river. I never won. Of course, I still feel terrible. We were lawless back then. We imagined the city was a dustbin. Today I recycle.



## Raping Rose Gardens

At dusk, when our neighbor was nestled in front of her television eating her salty TV dinner, we quietly trespassed into her flourishing garden filled with all kinds of flowers and weeds. Ma taught me how to smell for lemon balm and snatch them from the earth without remorse. While I gathered lemon balm, she'd snap the necks of roses not minding the thorns clawing at her like cats in heat. Sometimes, our neighbor Pat would catch us in the act and screamed for us to scat like rats, but she had bad cataracts and couldn't see the true rose rapists, me and my mother. Once we gathered our fill of flora we'd return home where my mother would boil them in a large pot of holy water for hours.



## Fighting the Homeless for Holy Water

The holy water we collected from the Church of the Immaculate Conception on the Lower East Side. We'd fight the homeless who were desperately trying to take full baths so that we could fill our empty milk cartons with the divine flow. "Ladies first," my mother would holler and hustle. I liked the smell of holy water because it tasted like spoons.



## The Flower Bath

Whenever Ma boiled the roses and lemon balm in holy water, the entire house smelled of rot. Strange, because you would think it would smell fragrant, but it did not. It smelled of rot. After it cooled down, she would take a flower bath and I would peep through the bathroom keyhole in wonder, holding my nose. She never gave me the flower bath. Maybe she thought it wouldn't work on an athiest, but I still very much wanted one.



## Saintito Mi Saintito

Ma was very religious and my father and I were athiests, but I loved watching her perform her daily rituals and would pretend to pray and light candles just like her. She had these beautiful shrines in every corner of the house. They were her Saintitos. There was Guadalupe, the patron saint of Americas. St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. St. Anthony, the patron saint of lost and stolen things. Lourdes, the patron saint of bodily illnesses. Glasses of water were on every table and always fresh flowers that would eventually rot and make the water smell like Chinatown sewers. Among all her religious articles, were Lotto tickets and Double your Luck scratch offs. And lots of pennies and gray scraps from the scratch offs.

Every night she'd light these large candles and close her eyes. Under a slight mustache she'd bleach blonde, she murmured prayers she called novenas. It was a kind of hushed sound that I liked to listen to like a radio.



## The Botanica in the Bronx

Whenever she needed to rejuvenate her shrines, Ma and I would head to her favorite Botanica in the Bronx. Every inch of the store was crowded in saintitos, talismans, charms, amulets, religious candles, rosaries, Buddhas, American Indian Chiefs, and infinite lotions and potions. Some lotions were to help you find love. Others were to help you get rich. And some were to remove stubborn jinxes. Ma was only interested in the saintitos and rosaries, but my eyes were always hungry for everything magical.

Memories of this store still fascinate me. I remember visiting a botanica on the Lower East Side out of nostalgia and buying a lotion to help cast a love spell. But I grew scared about messing with the magical and threw it out. What can I say, I'm a pollita at heart.



## Miracle Bra For My Behind

I call my mother up one morning and say, Hola! Que tal? Bien! Y tu?

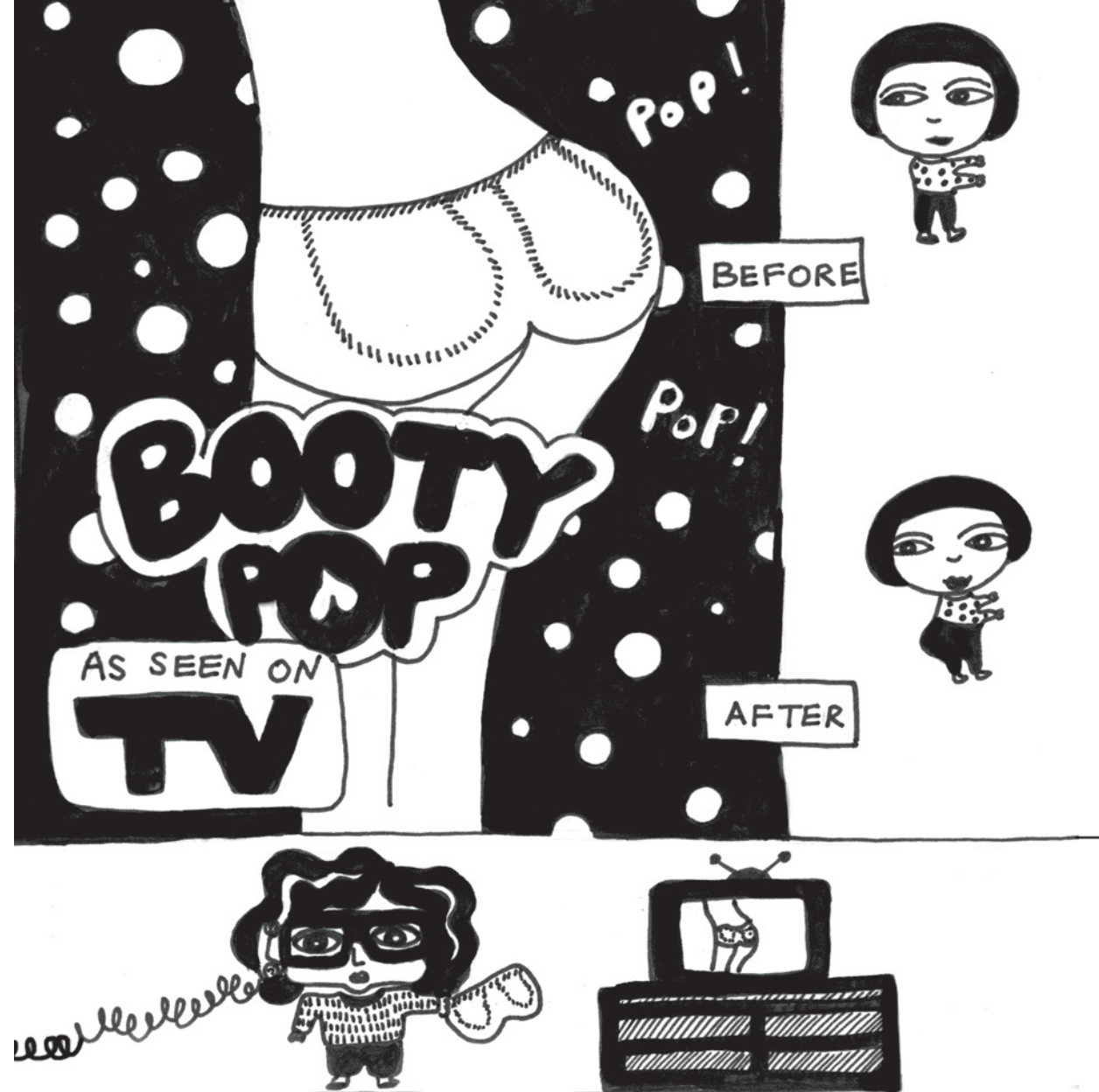
You are my Nina Bonita. My Nina Locita Bonita, she plays.

Do you want an ass mi Nina Bonita? I buy you jeans that work like a Miracle Bra for your behind.

No thanks, Ma. She knows I can't fill skirts because my ass is Chinita flat, not Latina round like hers.

She insists, this way when you fall down you won't hurt yourself. You have some cushion. Tu entiendes mi Nina Bonita? Pero, be careful because on Cristina's talk show on Telemundo, they had this one girl who got behind surgery but one part of her behind still droops. Now she walks around with one sagging behind while the other one is high and gordita. Surgery is dangerous. Don't worry, I buy one for you. I make sure the price is special.

Gracias mi madre. But, no thanks.



## Coca-cola Love

Ma taught me a lot about love. She told me that a man who really loves you buys you a Coca-cola. That's how she knew my father loved her. She would give him gum to stop smoking. He would buy her cans of Coca-cola to keep her caffienated. It was their version of a romantic red rose, but it was aluminum and filled with sweet and fizzy caffeine that made her heart race. I'm not sure why, but for some reason I believed her love story and whenever a boy bought me a Coca-cola, I secretly thought he loved me.

