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Latinas in the Kitchen: The Rhetoric of Food and Desire

She imagined herself alone and shriveled in her mother's womb, envisioned the first days in her mother's unyielding arms. Her mother's fingers were stiff and splayed as spoons, her milk a tasteless gray. Her mother stared at her with eyes collapsed of expectation. If it's true that babies learn love from their mother's voices, then this is what Lourdes heard: "I will not remember her name."

Christina Garcia, *Dancing in Cuban*

Developing Desire

From infancy we learn immediately to desire certain elements in our environment to make us comfortable. Infants cry moments after birth as they feel a change in temperature. No longer are they wrapped within the warmth of the womb but are typically introduced to the chill of the delivery room or other birthing area where the temperature is below their mother's internal body heat. Once they are cleaned, examined, and wrapped in a blanket, their next need is met: hunger. If the child is born at the appropriate time, its sucking muscles have developed, and it can find sustenance from its mother, or if necessary, from a bottle. Thus, whether the child is male or female, it learns immediately that without warmth and food, it is in discomfort, and its needs must be filled. Sigmund Freud describes this preverbal stage as pre-oedipal and theorizes that unconscious sexual desire develops here. In his essay, "Infantile Sexuality," Freud explains that the first pleasure that an infant experiences comes from "his sucking at his mother's breasts. . . . The child's lips, in our view, behave like an erotogenic zone, and no doubt stimulation by the warm flow of milk is the cause of the pleasurable sensation. The satisfaction of the erotogenic zone is associated, in this first instance, with the satisfaction of the need for nourishment" (47-48). At this point, infants form their first unconsciously sexual attachment to their mother, but it is thwarted by a bigger and stronger person, the father. To become a successful heterosexual individual, the infant must be able to shift the desire for the mother to a desire for the father and, ultimately, to a desire for an appropriate person, another female for the son and another male for the daughter (Chodorow 93-94).

Furthermore, as Freud describes, from birth, this development of sexual desire has been linked to food; therefore, not surprisingly, the desire for food and sex has been frequently marketed in unison.¹ Consequently, the commodification of women juxtaposed to certain erotically suggestive objects or foods objectifies women, making them tantalizing objects of desire. And many young women have not only accepted this as part of their identity, but they have learned how to use it to manipulate men's desires. However, in some cases, food becomes an inappropriate substitute for sex, and, instead of satiating one's physical desire for an unattainable person through sexual gratification,

¹ Heather Brook's article "Feed Your Face," notes that "[t]he reification and styling of food has been explicitly likened to pornography. In analysis of 'food porn,' Ros Coward (and others) analyze examples of marketing which draw explicit associations between sexual pleasure and food (Coward 1984)" (145). She also quotes from Maree Burns: "Popular cultural representations of women's deviant appetites are not confined to prescriptions about appropriate eating but are infused with sexual themes whereby women's desire for food is often conflated with, and substituted for, desire for sex" (Burns 2004, 279)" (145). Brook continues this section of her article providing sexually suggestive advertisements of women juxtaposed with food as well as a quotation from John Berger's text, *Ways of Seeing*: "Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own" (Berger 1972, 55)," which she expands by saying that "women are exhorted not just to feed others' appetites but also to hunger for hunger—or, perhaps, to hunger to be *hungered for*" (146).

Another article Brook cites that concerns the connection between food and sexuality is Abigail Solomon-Godeau's "The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Feminine Display" in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, edited by V. de Grazia and E. Furlough.

a person turns to the physical pleasures found in eating. Again, Freud, in his essay "Infantile Sexuality," explains that even though the two needs—for sexual satisfaction and for "taking nourishment" (48)—separate when teeth appear, a phenomenon known as sublimation occurs: "diversion of sexual instinctual forces from sexual aims and their directions to new ones . . ." (44), such as eating. This article argues that Lourdes Puentes, the major character in Christina Garcia's novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, employs dysfunctional eating habits as sublimation of her sexual desire, and the text reveals rhetoric associated with the desire of both food and sex to disguise Lourdes Puentes's sexual repression and her inability to solve personal problems.

Dreaming in Cuban

I have come to the conclusion that for many, obesity has an important positive function; it is a compensatory mechanism to a frustrating and stressful life.
Hilde Bruch, "Anorexia Nervosa and Its Differential Diagnosis"

Before we can begin a study of what Lourdes Puente desires, we must investigate the definitions of incest, a topic with multiple meanings. From a legal perspective, Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman² provide the fifty states' incest statutes, and each one includes sexual intercourse or penetration between individuals who are related as "an ancestor or descendent" (222) or between "persons within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity" (224), including "step children and adopted children" (225), or "with brother or sister, whole [or] half blood" (230). In their work, *Father-Daughter Incest*, Herman and Hirschman further define incest as occurring "[w]hen a parent compels a child to fulfill his sexual needs. . . . The actual sexual encounter may be brutal or tender, painful or pleasurable; but it is always, inevitably, destructive to the child" (4). Here we must note that Herman and Hirschman lack specificity about the "sexual needs" being fulfilled. This fulfillment can be done in ways that do not necessarily include sexual intercourse: oral-genital contact, manual manipulation, inappropriate hugging and kissing, voyeurism, or any other activity that arouses sexual feelings and fulfills them. In a study described in Elaine Westerlund's work *Women's Sexuality after Childhood Incest*, Westerlund defines incest as a "major psychological trauma in the lives of women" (29). In the Incest Survivors Questionnaire, Westerlund offered six kinds of sexual acts in addition to sexual intercourse (190-91). In responses, vaginal intercourse was experienced by only 49 percent of the respondents while 95 percent, the highest rate, reported only "kissing and/or fondling" (219). A total of fourteen kinds of sexual activity were reported.

While Westerlund offers specific incestuous acts, Herman and Hirschman added two further dimensions to incest: parental power and secrecy—two qualities of importance in Lourdes Puente's experiences. Herman and Hirschman set aside the psychological element and focused on the power exerted by a parental figure: "What matters is the relationship that exists by virtue of the adult's parental power and the child's dependency" (70). Furthermore, the incest, in whatever form, is usually couched in secrecy, a silence that a woman, especially a Latina, is familiar with. Frequently, the parental authority tells the child that this is "their secret" or that if she shares their secret, it will hurt "mommy" and her siblings. Thus, the child must not only keep the secret, but she has to live with the guilt of what might happen if she discloses the activity and the part she would play in hurting her family. So, for Herman and Hirschman, if a parent feels that his behavior must be kept a secret, then it is probably not only "overly eroticized" but "is probably inappropriate" (205). With these as background definitions and characteristics as well as Freud's explanation, I argue that we should recognize that Lourdes's experiences do not fall into a traditionally, legally accepted category of incest. Instead, she receives a form of paternal love that appears to be culturally acceptable and does not cross a physical boundary, but still inflicts a psychological trauma that transcends cultural boundaries.

Food and Sex

² Judith Lewis Herman is a Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School and Director of Training at the Victims of Violence Program with the Department of Psychiatry at the Cambridge Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts. *Father-Daughter Incest* was first published in 1981 and was reissued in 2000 with a new Afterword ("The Case of Trauma"). In 1996 Herman received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies ("ISTSS Awards").

Rather than denying the presence, knowledge, and fear of dysfunctional sexuality that scientific studies clearly reveal among family members in primarily dominant society studies, Latina literature acknowledges the problems within our own culture. From Sandra Cisneros to Denise Chavez, Gloria Anzaldúa³ and Christina Garcia, Latina writers openly discuss unhealthy homes where daughters are exposed to problematic sexual understanding stemming from their experiences or lack of experiences with male family members. Although Tere, from *Loving Pedro Infante*, and Lourdes Puente from *Dreaming in Cuban*, share similar sexual and eating disorders because of their misidentified and unsatisfied desires, Lourdes's problems arise from the abandonment of her mother and a much more complex relationship with food and sex than Tere, as Lourdes's desires stem from multiple levels. As a naturalized U. S. citizen, Lourdes adopts an inordinate love for America and American democracy in contrast to her undisguised hatred of Cuba and Communism. Finally, Lourdes hungers not only for food, but, like Pancha in *Real Women Have Curves*, for a child. This paper, however, will consider only Lourdes's dysfunctional consumption of food and sex to handle the multiple difficulties she faces and the repressed incestuous desires she feels for her father.

Although *Dreaming in Cuban* opens in Santa Teresa del Mar, Cuba, with Celia, the matriarch of the del Pino family helping to guard the north coast of Cuba, readers do not meet Lourdes Puente until the second chapter where the narrator hints at Lourdes's sex and food disorders: "It is 4:00 a.m. [Lourdes] turns to her husband sleeping beside her. . . . She has exhausted poor Rufino again. Lourdes puts on a size 26 white uniform with wide hip pockets and flat, rubber-soled shoes" (17). From her introduction, readers become aware of Lourdes's over-indulgence and hedonistic involvement in sex and food.⁴ That she clearly hungers for some unattainable, metaphorical sustenance is also displayed in her size.

Yet Lourdes is neither a weak nor an unsuccessful woman, and Elspeth Probyn argues "that food and its relation to bodies is fundamentally about power: 'linked to the mode of production of material goods, the analysis of cooking [baking] has to be related to the distribution of power and authority in the economic sphere" (7). In fact, Lourdes owns a bakery and by the end of the novel, she owns two and has dreams of having a chain of bakeries across the country. On the other hand, Marion Woodman suggests:

...that 20th -century women have been living for centuries in a male-oriented culture which has kept them unconscious of their own feminine principle. Now in their attempt to find their own place in a masculine world, they have unknowingly accepted male values—goal-oriented lives, compulsive drivenness, and concrete bread which fails to nourish their feminine mystery. (10)

However, as Lourdes moves away from a job where she was "classifying the records of patients who had died" (18), she appears to find pleasure in feeding others and in making her bread products as

³ In *The House on Mango Street*, one of Esperanza's friends displays behavior that suggests that she suffers sexual abuse from her father. In *Loving Pedro Infante*, Tere grows up in a home without her father, and she is unable to learn appropriate male-female behavior without his presence or the presence of another father figure, which leads to her inappropriate choices in men and her inability to become involved in a positive relationship with a man. In Gloria Anzaldúa's book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa explains:

La gorra, el rebozo, la mantilla are symbols of my culture's "protection" of women. Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles. It keeps the girlchild from other men—don't poach on my preserves, only I can touch my child's body. Our mothers taught us well, "Los hombres nomás quieren una cosa"; men aren't to be trusted, they are selfish and are like children. Mothers made sure we didn't walk into a room of brothers or fathers or uncles in nightgowns or shorts. We were never alone with men, not even those of our own family. (39-40)

⁴ Andréa Poyastro Pinheiro et al. report in their article "Sexual Functioning in Women with Eating Disorders" that many women who suffer from anorexia nervosa as well as to those who suffer from bulimia nervosa display characteristics of eating disorders, which, in turn, "influence sexual functioning" (123). Even though there is little research in these areas, the authors cite studies that have found that "women with BN [bulimia nervosa] symptomatology report an earlier age of sexual encounters and have more sex partners and *higher sexual desire and fantasy* [my emphasis] compared with women with restricting AN [anorexia nervosa]" (124). Upon completion of their study, the researchers compared their findings to other existing studies and found that women with bulimia nervosa did not have as high a loss of libido as those with the various forms of anorexia nervosa (128).

attractive as possible to those who come to her shop. In Cuba she had no power, no ability to access or develop her business sense; however, in the U.S., she can become an entrepreneur and move in the direction of the American Dream, admittedly, a male-oriented dream but one that she infuses with a feminine sense. Whereas women's private role has been that of nurturer, one of several "subtle factors that increase the risk of obesity in women" (Maccoby & Jacklin cited in Hall and Havassy 164), for Lourdes, it has spilled into the public arena as the business woman is not only involved in profit but also in the aesthetics of her product and in offering comfort and fulfilling the needs of her customers: "Lourdes lines the display cases with paper doilies and organizes the croissants and coffee rings. . . . [And] she sets the first pot of coffee to brew. . . ." (18, 20). Furthermore, her baked goods provide a sensuous form of comfort food for herself: "She is comforted by the order of the round loaves, the texture of grain and powdered sugar, the sustaining aromas of vanilla and almond" (18) even though the only sweet treats she enjoys eating are the pecan sticky buns, of which she reserves "two to eat later" (19).

The bakery, however, provides the environment that exacerbates her obesity. In a 1971 study, researchers found that "[a] well-studied characteristic of the obese is the tendency to eat in response to external clues rather than in response to internal physiological states. . . . In general, the obese eat more than normally when food is visible, easily accessible, and extremely tasty and abstain more easily in environments devoid of food cues" (Rodin cited in Hall & Havassy 164). Unfortunately, while she is making preparations to begin the day, Lourdes discovers that her father has died, but she is too busy to attend to her dead father's needs. In her text concerning eating disorders, Marion Woodman discusses the Christmas legend *The Owl Was the Baker's Daughter*, a Christmas legend about Christ stopping at a bakery. The baker's daughter fails to meet the Lord's needs and is turned into an owl. Much like the baker's daughter, Lourdes "is so busy preparing the [daily] bread and putting her shop in order that" (8) she misses the importance of "feeding" her run-away daughter, Pilar, and tending to the immediate needs of saying goodbye to her father.

However, at one point, Lourdes's anxiety about her missing daughter drives her to consume "a two-and-a-half-pound stash of pecan sticky buns" (23), representative of the "'dough [that] immediately . . . began to swell, and presently became of a most enormous size' . . . [the] concrete bread" (8, 10), which she began thawing at nine o'clock the evening of Pilar's failure to come home and which she finished eating by midnight. This attempt to control her anxiety about Pilar's absence is sublimation in the form of binge eating and a way to care for herself when Rufino is unable to comfort her. Basically alone, she sublimates her fears, anger, and anxiety about Pilar as well as her sense of loss over the death of her father to anger at Rufino for not being available when she needed him and to the sticky buns. According to Susan Bordo, "the emotional comfort of self-feeding is rarely turned to in a state of pleasure and independence, but in despair, emptiness, loneliness, and desperation" (126). At a time when Lourdes is especially vulnerable and most in need of support and love from Rufino, a time when her daughter has been missing all day and her father has died, the only place where she can find solace is in the pecan sticky buns.

Ironically, Lourdes has been hungering desperately for "something [Rufino] could not give her, [and] she wasn't sure what" it was (20). After her family had lived in Brooklyn for five years, Jorge, Lourdes's father, came to New York for chemotherapy, and "her appetite for sex and baked goods increased dramatically" (20). The longer she cared for her father, taking him to the hospital, the greater her need to sublimate her inappropriate sexual feeling for Jorge, and "the more she reached for the pecan sticky buns, and for Rufino" (20) until "Rufino's body ached from the exertions. His joints swelled like an arthritic's. [And] he begged his wife for a few nights' peace. . . ." (21). During this time, "Lourdes . . . gained 118 pounds" (20). According to Bordo, "[e]ating is not really a metaphor for the sexual act; rather, the sexual act, when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire. Thus, women's sexual appetites must be curtailed and controlled, because they threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the mate" (117). That Rufino begs for her to stop suggests that he sees and "fears being controlled by [her] sexual power" (Sharpe 87), sexual power that is only a patriarchal privilege. Despite what seems to be a voracious appetite for sex, with "[h]er legs looped and rotated like an acrobat's, her neck swiveled with extra ball bearings. And her mouth. Lourdes's mouth and tongue were like the mouths and tongues of a dozen experienced women" (21), she could not be satisfied. Her unappeasable appetite was searching, indeed, for something she could not get from Rufino, for what she desired and did not realize was her father.

From a Freudian perspective, Lourdes's behavior stems from her infantile sexuality and her object choices, which originate in the Oedipal stage. David Richter explains that a "successful Oedipal outcome [for girls occurs when] the girl shifts her sexual desire from the mother to the father (who possesses the penis she wants). And then, when her sexual advances to the father are opposed, begins to identify with the mother in order eventually to possess another man like the father" (1016). Unlike Tere, in *Loving Pedro Infante*, Lourdes did not lose her father and develop a need to go looking for a father figure to satisfy her sexual needs. Instead, Lourdes was abandoned by her mother immediately after her birth—Celia "held her child by one leg, handed her to Jorge, and said, 'I will not remember her name'" (43)—an act of rejection that Lourdes feels but does not remember until her father's ghost tells her the story of her mother and her own birth. That symbolic and metaphorical act results in the reproduction of the Latino patriarchal ideology of paternal ownership of the females—wife and daughters—in the household. Jorge takes ownership of Lourdes as Celia relinquishes her daughter, and Jorge's ghost admits to Lourdes decades later: "I took you from her while you were still a part of her. I wanted you for myself. And you've always been mine, *hija*" (196). These acts—Celia's and Jorge's—result in producing "the absent mother. Since the trauma takes place during the very early pre-oedipal stages of development, and is thus pre-verbal, the experience remains for the most part unconscious" (Dillman 1). But rather than deal with attempting to become a meaningful part of Celia's life, Lourdes clings to her father for her needs. Celia's relinquishing of Lourdes to Jorge, however, was, in fact, a positive act at that moment, for unbeknownst to her, Celia was unable emotionally and psychologically to care for her infant. Thus, Jorge becomes the sole provider for Lourdes, and as the years pass, the two grow more attached to each other, to the point of either excluding or indifferently accepting the company of Lourdes's sister Felicia when she wants to join the circle. After recuperating from a debilitating car accident, during which Lourdes slept at Jorge's side nightly, he recovered to the point that he could play again with his older daughter. However, when "Felicia crie[d] and want[ed] to play with them, . . . they ignore[d] her"(54).

Because Jorge was a salesman, he was away from home, and Lourdes either waited for him to return, dressed to please him, or she accompanied him during her summer vacations. According to Celia, "Lourdes is two and a half years old. . . . Jorge calls her every night when he travels. 'When are you coming home, Papi? When are you coming home?' she asks him. On the day he returns, even if he's not expected until midnight, she wears her frilly party dress and waits for him by the front door" (52). Jean Wyatt, author of *Reconstructing Desire*, explains that this activity is one of three—"waiting, flirting, and the oedipal triangle" (27)—in the pattern of the female unconscious where the woman is raised in a patriarchal family.⁵ This homecoming provides excitement in an otherwise mundane day and foreshadows the traditional romantic scenario played out in fairy tales with the young woman waiting for her prince to come and rescue her, an event that has its "active and passive roles first played out by father and daughter" (28). Herman points out that "[c]onscientious parents often wonder where to draw the line between affectionate intimacy and inappropriate sexual conduct with children" (205); however, Jorge consistently fails to see that his behavior, which apparently does not include sexual, physical contact, is indistinguishable in the child's mind from sexual love, and the two—parental and sexual love—become forever entangled, leading to Lourdes's later unperceived sexual desire for her father.

The narrator skips most of Lourdes's adolescent and young adult years, and moves to her engagement to Rufino. At that point, Jorge feels threatened by the interloper, and according to Celia, "Jorge is so jealous that he acts like a stubborn child. He refuses to shake Rufino's hand and then he locks himself in our bedroom, sulking until Rufino leaves. Jorge complains incessantly about him, finding faults where there are none. This is the first time I've ever seen Lourdes cross with her father" (205). She also indicates that "Jorge blames himself for traveling so much during her childhood" (206). Jorge's possessiveness of Lourdes is seen through the belief that he has lost in the "male competition for [his] daughter's affection and attention" (Sharpe 85). Just as Celia relinquished Lourdes to Jorge, he must now relinquish his control and her love to another man. He will not only no longer play the role of protector, but he will lose his control over her virginity, thus displaying not only a jealousy that Celia immediately recognizes, but a "sexual jealousy" over her possession (both literal and figurative) by Rufino (86).

⁵ Wyatt explains the other two activities, flirting and the Oedipal triangle, each of which clearly appears in *Dreaming in Cuban* with Lourdes and her father being the main participants.

Lourdes's marriage and move to New York were positive steps in her unconscious attempt to break away from her romantic relationship with Jorge. She makes the required departure from her father's home to her husband's and ultimately to her family home apart from what is ironically called the "Fatherland" (106), Cuba. In fact, her desire to move as far as possible from the Florida coast that is so close to Cuba reveals her attempt to sever her ties with a land that metaphorically and literally protects rapists. Again, ironically, Lourdes is raped by the authority figure who should have been there to protect her, El Líder's soldier, as well as being metaphorically raped psychologically and emotionally by her own father, the patriarchal figure who should have protected her from himself as well as from others. To Jorge's credit, readers discover that he never had sexual intercourse with Lourdes, who reveals that she has repressed her rape memory and proudly recalls that she "was a virgin when she married" (168). That, however, does not vindicate him from arousing her childhood fantasies, thus allowing her to develop feelings that were unacceptable, and creating psychological trauma in her childhood that lasted into her adult life.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, most Latinos refuse to go to counseling, believing that they will betray the family, especially the patriarchy. The belief that the father/husband is always right is the standard in the Latino family. To betray the men is to be a traitor to the culture. Consequently, to cast aspersions on the head of the household, especially from the arena of sex, or to denigrate one's mother by suggesting that she abandoned her child is to betray the love and the closeness of *la familia*. And the punishment for that is to be cast out from the family; thus, that fear leads to silence. Although Gloria Anzaldúa refers in the following passage to her life as a lesbian, she speaks for all Latinas whose sexuality has strayed from the path of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*:

We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. (42)

And as we have seen, the "unacceptable parts" that are pushed into the shadows for Lourdes are those incestuous aspects of her sexuality that unconsciously draw her to her father and that she can only continue to repress further and further into her psyche until the only way out for these feelings is sublimation and obesity. She experiences the need for silence that most females who have been violated feel. As Judith Herman points out, "[t]he victim who reveals her secret implicitly challenges a traditional and cherished social value, the right of a man to do as he pleases in his own home" (130). That Lourdes might not even know consciously what this secret is is highly probable, and, consequently, she cannot uncover it without psychological help.

From the Latino perspective, only Anglos go to psychiatrists. Rather than looking to a psychologist or other mental health professionals, Latinos choose physicians or *curanderos* to cure them of problems with *los nervios*, depression, and other conditions they suffer from (García-Preto 163). Latinos keep their problems to themselves; they don't even share the burden with others in the family. Thus, authors like Cherríe Moraga and Richard Rodriguez know that their families will probably never read their works, *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca paso por sus labios* and *Hunger for Memory: The Autobiography of Richard Rodriguez*, respectively, but if they do read them, their relatives will rebuke them for divulging family secrets. And others, like Denise Chavez and Sandra Cisneros, recognize and refuse to be complicit in hiding the fact that incest does occur in Latino families. And as Herman points out in her Afterword, 2000: "Understanding Incest Twenty Years Later," "[l]eading authors of contemporary fiction" (221), such as Jane Smiley, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison (243) as well as "leading figures of daytime television. . . . [and] well-known celebrities [such as Oprah Winfrey], have disclosed their own experiences" (241).

These revelations, however, are not the case with Lourdes and many other Latina protagonists who sublimate their sexual desire into a strong desire for food. The authors are not only revealing the hidden violations experienced in the families, but they are also examining the consequences that such violations have on the daughters. Regardless of whether Lourdes is in Cuba or in the U.S., her psyche has been damaged, and she suffers the repercussions of repressed incestuous desire for her father.

Even though she has severed her ties with Cuba, thus renouncing her social and patriotic identities, she cannot escape her ethnic identity, which has been part of her life since she was born. Try as she might to assimilate into the American way of life, going so far as to leave her daughter's punk painting of the Statue of Liberty on her bakery wall and rejecting El Líder and his Communist policies, Lourdes continues to hold on to her internalized beliefs and continues to feel love and loyalty for the only person who sincerely cared for her as a child and who loved her when her mother was not there to perform her duty even though he damaged her deeply. Thus, Lourdes will probably live the rest of her life tied to an eating disorder without knowing why she has to binge and why she cannot lose weight.ⁱ

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