

# **The Best Little Girl in the World Study Guide**

**The Best Little Girl in the World by Steven Levenkron**

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## Plot Summary

Francesca is a fifteen-year-old who sees herself as lacking in many areas, including her body weight. She describes herself as "a monster" at five-foot-four and ninety-eight pounds and immediately prepares to follow the advice of her ballet teacher to "thin and firm." As the story opens, Francesca is standing at the ballet barre during dance class. She is constantly comparing herself in the mirror to the others in the class, straightens her leg to be more like one girl and straightens her pose to be more like another. The teacher, "Madame", is counting out a beat and changes the words from counting to tell Francesca that she's doing very well. Madame does later admonish her, saying that she must be "firm and trim". Francesca takes the admonition to heart and begins losing weight, but the desire to lose weight isn't the basis of her problem and the complex issues become a job her parents simply can't solve.

When Grace, Francesca's mother, discovers her daughter's condition, she is angry at what she calls Francesca's dieting. When Francesca's father, Hal, becomes involved, he is also angry and believes Francesca is simply being willfully disobedient. As her parents learn about anorexia, Francesca continues to lose weight until she's hospitalized and eventually passes out from shock, prompting doctors to introduce nutrition through a tube in her chest. Francesca soon comes to trust the second psychologist, Sandy Sherman. Sandy has had limited success treating anorexics and promises Francesca that he doesn't want to force her to eat but will help her find the source of her fears so that she no longer has to starve herself.

What Sandy comes to realize is that Francesca's parents have spent so much time and energy on the troubled life of their older daughter, Susanna, that Francesca has been on the outskirts of her own family. This feeling of alienation has prompted her to feel unworthy of affection and even friendship from anyone else as well, prompting Francesca's feelings that she never belongs in any situation. By the time Francesca has begun gaining weight, she's come to realize that her feelings and desires are valid. One example of this turn is her attitude toward her brother, Gregg, who is studying at Harvard. Gregg calls Francesca once at the urging of his mother but doesn't make time to visit her while she's in the hospital. During the phone call, Francesca is upbeat and later says it's because she fears Greg won't like her if she sounds depressed. Her roommate, Lila, says that's Gregg's problem—not Francesca's. Francesca later writes Gregg a letter telling him that she considers him "a shit" for not visiting her. Sandy says that Francesca's decision to write that letter, regardless of what Gregg might think, is another step in the right direction.

Through her work with Sandy and her views of another "skinny", Francesca comes to a greater understanding of herself, her ability to express emotions, and to fight for what she wants, and the desire to be healthy rather than so skinny that her life is in danger. When she has gained back up to eighty-five pounds, she is released from the hospital, which will begin another phase of her recovery.



# Chapters 1 through 3

## Chapters 1 through 3 Summary

Francesca is a fifteen-year-old who sees herself as lacking in many areas, including her body weight. She describes herself as "a monster" at five-foot-four and ninety-eight pounds and immediately prepares to follow the advice of her ballet teacher to be "thin and firm". As the story opens, Francesca is standing at the ballet barre during dance class. She is constantly comparing herself in the mirror to the others in the class, straightens her leg to be more like one girl, and straightens her pose to be more like another. The teacher, "Madame", is counting out a beat and changes the words from counting to tell Francesca that she's doing very well. Madame does later admonish her, saying that she must be "firm and trim".

Francesca declines the invitation to join several girls for burgers and walks the thirty blocks home. She arrives to find her mother Grace reading a letter from Francesca's sister, Susanna. Grace says that Susanna is considering moving from her current home in a commune to another and Grace secretly worries that there are drugs involved. Francesca notes that letters from her brother, Gregg, are always about his latest achievements at Harvard. Saying that she has to do homework, Francesca goes to her room where she looks at herself critically in the mirror. She notes that her breasts aren't large, but that they're merely extra flab and that they have to go. She finds her only redeeming quality to be the fact that she can see her ribs when she raises her arms. Tired, she naps until time for dinner and pleads that she doesn't like lamb chops; however, her father, Hal, insists that she eat. She finally wolfs down her food, goes to the bathroom where she gags herself until she vomits, then returns to the dining room as if nothing has happened. On another night, she tells her mother that she'll have a sandwich later and takes down the dishes from the cupboard but only drinks water.

After the first week, she's lost four pounds and is determined to do more. Madame notes the change in her body and tells her she's on the right track, promising a spot in a prestigious summer ballet program if she continues to do well. Madame tells Francesca to ask her parents, but Francesca determines that she's going and that there's no need to ask. Her parents note her dinnertime eating habits and insist that she eats. She obeys but always gags herself afterwards to rid her body of what she sees as the grotesque amount of food they insist she eat. Her mother notes that Francesca seems sluggish and that she seems often to want to take a nap in the afternoon before dinner. Then she sees Francesca without shirt or jeans and realizes how much weight she's lost. Francesca argues that she's just trying to get in shape for her bikini and that she's hardly dieting at all, which prompts Grace to say it's time for a doctor's appointment. Dr. Gordon, finding that Francesca now weighs eighty-eight pounds and that her period is late, orders some tests and tells Grace to track how much Francesca is eating, sleeping, and exercising. Grace says that her daughter is distant and that she is now taking dance five days each week.



At home, Hal wants to know the results of the doctor's visit. Though he sounds angry, Grace notes the concern that he can't bring himself to express otherwise. When Grace says Dr. Gordon wants to see Francesca again in two weeks, Hal is angry, saying that sounds typical of a high-priced doctor. Grace and Hall diverge onto a discussion about Susanna and another about money, which Grace corrects by saying that they now have to deal with the problem Francesca is having. This is new to them as they've typically had no problems with Francesca. Grace, looking for something to blame for the situation and seeming to realize how serious it is, notes that she hadn't planned to have another child after Gregg and Susanna, but that she'd loved Francesca instantly. Francesca overhears the conversation and is somewhat pleased that she - at last - has become the subject of her parents' constant bickering.

## Chapters 1 through 3 Analysis

It's an indication of Francesca's insecurity that she wants so desperately to know if Madame had really praised her or if the words were aimed at someone else. She considers several ways to ask but realizes that they all sound childish. Her insecurity stretches to the dressing room where two girls are whispering about someone who doesn't dance well and Francesca believes they are speaking of her. When the girls invite her to go along with them for burgers after class, she tries to believe that means the girls were talking about someone else but continues to worry over the point. One day at school, when she has only a few bites of yogurt for lunch, someone asks what's wrong, which Francesca takes to mean that there is something wrong with her.

When Francesca vows to lose what she calls extra weight, she also makes another change. She begins referring to herself as "Kessa". She will use this personae as she continues to work at changing her life and lifestyle to become this firmer, fitter, slimmer person she envisions in her mind. Francesca seems to want desperately to please.

The anorexia, which has yet to be formally diagnosed, is manifesting itself as a serious problem. Francesca describes the unclean feeling she's left with if food touches her lips and the fear that purging isn't sufficient to rid her body of all the unwanted food. She also notes the fear that takes over her emotions when she's been forced to eat what constitutes a full meal to her now-shrunken stomach.



# Chapters 4 through 6

## Chapters 4 through 6 Summary

Francesca goes to a party with an older girl named Julia, who has noted Francesca's dancing skill. Francesca hates the fact that everyone is smoking cigarettes and marijuana and drinking. She feigns illness and goes home early, vowing to never go to another party but to devote herself to her dance. She has a nightmare that night, involving Madame, her parents, and Julia. When she wakes, she blames the dream on exposure to the marijuana smoke at the party and again vows to never go to another party.

The next morning, she is careful to perform her morning rituals without touching the toilet. She also stares at herself in the mirror, disgusted that "Francesca" seems to have returned, though she determines to again put Kessa in control. She notes the "flab" of her breast and pinches it until the girl in the mirror - Francesca - cries, again leaving Kessa in control.

Grace takes Francesca for her next doctor's appointment and Dr. Gordon knows immediately that she hasn't followed orders and her weight - eighty-one pounds - proves it. When she finishes the examination, she tells Grace that she believes it to be anorexia nervosa, that she wants Francesca to see a psychiatrist, and that they'll put her in the hospital if she gets much worse, though she says the hospital will only keep Francesca from starving to death. At home, Francesca refuses the milk Grace offers, which sends Grace on an angry tirade. Later, Grace tells Hal the result of the visit, which sends Hal into an angry tirade, saying that he and Grace are "professionals" because they've raised three children. When Grace begins to tell Hal about her frustration at trying to talk to Francesca, Hal immediately relents, saying that if a psychiatrist is what's needed, he'll make the appointment. To lighten the mood, he laughs that the one they choose is named "Smith", saying that they should at least get someone named "Freud" or "Schmidt".

Hal tells Grace about the son of a friend who sees a psychiatrist and who never does anything productive now. He seems to equate the psychiatric treatment with this person's lack of motivation and accomplishment and says he doesn't want something like this for Francesca. Hal does make the call and refuses to talk to Dr. Smith's secretary. Hal is reassured that Dr. Smith doesn't sound surprised at the words "anorexia nervosa". Hal agrees to an appointment the following Thursday, though it means he has to cancel a business lunch and they'll have to take Francesca out of school. Hal's attitude is interesting. He seems to realize that Francesca has a problem and that he as her parent has an obligation to do something about it, but wants it to be a problem that he can solve. When Grace tells him there's no way to know how long it might take for Francesca to get better, he is angry. He's angry again when the doctor calls him back at about ten minutes before the hour, citing the fact that a person pays for an hour with the doctor and gets only fifty minutes. Hal says that Dr. Smith had better



be good at his job, making it seem almost a threat. With all this, it seems that he is still very concerned and that his anger is largely at the fact that he can't solve this problem without help, and that even then there may not be an easy solution.

## Chapters 4 through 6 Analysis

At the party, Francesca is approached by a boy named Mike but she talks little, pretending to be high so that he'll leave her alone. He eventually says that she's "a drag", which makes her fear that others will do the same and that she'll become known as the girl who shouldn't go to parties. This is an interesting fear, considering that Francesca herself will vow to never again go to a party.

When Francesca learns that Dr. Gordon is going to give her medicine to make her eat, Francesca is afraid. She knows that her father will make her take it, and that even if she purges herself afterward there's going to be no way to get all of that medication out of her system.

Dr. Gordon says there are several possible causes for the disease. She says one is that the girls fear growing up. That seems a reasonable explanation in Francesca's case because she has said that she feared telling her mother when her first period began - that her mother would have no longer seen her as a child who needed to be cared for. She expresses a similar reaction when she began to develop breasts.



# Chapters 7 through 9,

## Chapters 7 through 9, Summary

Francesca, Grace, and Hal all arrive separately at Dr. Alexander Smith's office on Park Avenue. Dr. Smith talks to Francesca alone for a few moments but she is afraid to answer, fearing that she will give away the existence of "Kessa". Then Dr. Smith talks to Hal and Grace, telling them that his fee is fifty dollars per session, that he plans to see Francesca two times each week, that he won't share information with her parents in order to develop a relationship with Francesca, that the sessions could go on for a year or two or longer, and that it's Francesca's responsibility to arrive, meaning they'll be billed whether she shows up or not. Francesca goes for six appointments then simply stops and Hal doesn't find out until a month later when he calls for an update on her condition. When he makes this discovery, he decides that it's time to take matters into his own hands. He tells Francesca that she's now to eat everything she's given at suppertime and breakfast time, and that if she hasn't changed her eating habits in a week he's going to make her stop dancing.

Francesca is not doing well in school and has, in fact, failed two subjects with all her grades dropping dramatically. She notes that she has no more excuses to offer for failing to turn in homework and decides that skipping class would be a better way to handle the situation.

Hal next takes Francesca to his old friend, Dr. Waldman. Waldman treats mainly elderly and Hispanics, and doesn't have an elite practice. When Hal tells him that the problem is that Francesca simply won't eat, Waldman seems skeptical. He examines her and sees that she weighs just seventy-eight pounds, and mentally compares her to another young patient who is losing weight because she has leukemia. It makes him mad and he says that there's too much sickness in the world as it is without a perfectly healthy girl trying to starve herself to death. He is abrupt, telling her that he'll hospitalize her with an IV and a feeding tube to provide nourishment if she doesn't start gaining weight. On his advice, Hal begins monitoring everything she eats and weighing her nightly. When she reaches seventy-five pounds, he realizes that she's been making herself vomit to purge the food he forces her to eat. While Hal is enraged, Francesca is pleased at the weight. Then Hal tells her that there's to be no more dance class, television or stereo. He says that if she's determined to starve, she's going to be a "bored skeleton".

## Chapters 7 through 9, Analysis

There's an additional look into the lives of these characters after the initial appointment with Dr. Smith. Grace admits that she's going to have to tell her mother because her mother will realize something is wrong and demand to know. Both Hal and Grace seem to fear and expect that there's something in their own past that caused Francesca's problem. Grace also notes that she constantly compares herself to others and she does





so as she leaves the office, saying that other people have problems in their lives as well but that she is apparently the only one with an anorexic daughter.

While Hal is talking to Francesca, laying down the new rules regarding eating, she refers to him as "the nice daddy", but says she's afraid to trust him because she knows this person won't remain with her. She seems to be craving this attention from her father. It's also interesting that Dr. Smith doesn't offer his own opinion that there's nothing much to be done about a person with anorexia except to hope he can help her learn to deal with it. Meanwhile, Hal comes to the conclusion that both Dr. Gordon and Dr. Smith were too lenient and that Francesca needs a firm hand, so announces that he's going to take her to a former classmate of his - Dr. Waldman. As Hal and Grace are faced with Francesca's failing grades and the news that she's not been going to Dr. Smith's, Hal seems to show more fear for her well-being than at any previous point. Grace, noting that this emotion isn't often seen in Hal, isn't certain whether to welcome it as a sign of his concern or fear it as a sign of how serious the situation really is.



# Chapters 10 through 13

## Chapters 10 through 13 Summary

Francesca loses an additional two pounds and her mother, seeing her without clothes for the first time in some months, is fearful and makes another appointment with Dr. Gordon. Francesca panics along the way because of her temptation to purchase food from the various vendors and is forty-five minutes late. Dr. Gordon, noting that Francesca now weighs seventy-three pounds, arranges for weekly appointments and says that she would put Francesca directly in the hospital except that she also plans to set up an appointment with a psychologist. The psychologist's name is Sandy Sherman and he has told Dr. Gordon that he's currently treating two anorexic girls, and that he's had some success with one.

Sandy Sherman is vastly different from Dr. Smith. Francesca is interested and fearful of a bond that begins to develop almost immediately. After only a few appointments, she finds herself outside his building and can't bring herself to go in. Sandy calls her home that evening and tells her that the only way their relationship will work is if she keeps her appointments. He says that if she misses the next appointment, he'll assume that she's made the decision not to go on with him and that he'll cross her off his list. The thought alarms Francesca, though she isn't specific about the reason for the alarm. Then her father begins yelling at her for failing to keep the appointment and Francesca, faced with his anger, finds that she is again in control of the situation.

Francesca does keep her next appointment but then sees Dr. Gordon. Weighing only seventy-two pounds is what prompts Dr. Gordon to order her hospitalized.

## Chapters 10 through 13 Analysis

Sandy has been treating two other anorexics but says he became involved with them after they'd already been hospitalized. He looks at Francesca and notes that he fears for her life. He tells her that he hopes she can gain "a pound or two", just so that she doesn't have to be hospitalized yet. She immediately loses more weight and two weeks later, Dr. Gordon makes the decision to hospitalize her. Though the threat continues to be made that she'll be put in the hospital, Francesca has come to believe that it's nothing more than idle threats and that it won't really happen. Sandy, meanwhile, feels as if "the sword that had been hanging over his head" had fallen. He realizes that Francesca is in danger of going into shock and has feared that it would happen in his office. With no medical training, Sandy has feared that he wouldn't know what to do.

The night after Francesca is hospitalized, Sandy dreams that there's an elaborate network of nets hanging from the ceiling of a building, and that many emaciated girls are being hanged by the neck and then flipped into the nets. In this dream, he's told that his

job is to put the rope around the neck of the girls. Sandy says that the dream recurs each time he sees Francesca.



# Chapters 14 through 16

## Chapters 14 through 16 Summary

As soon as she's left in the hospital, Francesca calls home to beg her mother to come get her. Her parents aren't yet home, having stopped for lunch. Francesca is angry by the time her mother answers but Grace remains firm. The next time Francesca calls, Hal answers and also brooks no nonsense. After that call, Hal leaves the phone off the hook and he and Grace share dinner and an evening at home together. Meanwhile, Francesca meets her roommate, a black girl named Lila who has had surgery to repair a club foot. When the dinner trays arrive, Francesca eats nothing and the worker who picks up the trays says Francesca is "a skinny", and predicts that she'll have tubes within a few days and that she soon won't be able to walk. Sandy warns that Francesca is - and will continue - manipulating Grace and Hal. He says that they have to be careful not to allow Francesca to pit Grace against the doctors or Sandy against the medical staff as she seeks to gain attention or get her own way.

In the hospital, Francesca is repulsed by Myrna's skinny body. She describes bingeing - eating everything in the refrigerator, which prompts Francesca to ask how she keeps from gaining weight. Myrna says that she then vomits and Francesca, though thinking of her own habits, says it's a disgusting thought. Francesca tells Myrna that all she wants to know is how to get out of the hospital. Myrna says the easiest is to find out how much weight they want her to gain, gain it, then go home and lose it again.

In the middle of the night before the procedure to insert a tube to get nutrition into Francesca's body through a vein, she wakes and collapses as she tries to get out of bed. Lila calls for a nurse. It's soon apparent to Lila that Francesca almost died, though Francesca says the next morning that she remembers none of it, though during the insertions of the IVs she continually cries out the question, "Will this make me fat?" When Dr. Meyer inserts the tube in her chest later that morning, she asks him how much weight she's going to gain. He says that's a question for Dr. Donaldson because he is "just the plumber".

Sandy soon talks to Francesca, telling her that the tube is not a punishment. He also tells her that he understands that she fears gaining weight, but that being fat isn't really the problem. He promises that as soon as she figures out what the real problem is, she won't need to be afraid. Sandy says that he and Dr. Donaldson have taken over responsibility for Francesca's well-being. She wavers between being glad that someone has finally taken over and fear of losing that control. Later, Myrna arrives in her room, saying that "they" finally "got to" Francesca.



## Chapters 14 through 16 Analysis

As Grace and Hal drive home, they are lost in their own thoughts. Both are relieved that the problem of how to handle Francesca has been taken out of their hands for the moment and both are ashamed of that sense of relief. They discuss it, and the fact that they've had no time for themselves since having a family. They stop for a nice lunch together - an event that hasn't happened recently. When Francesca talks to Grace and berates her for taking so long to get home, Grace immediately feels guilty. Grace and Hal are not to visit for the first month, indicating that Francesca's stay is likely to be lengthy.

Francesca talks to her roommate about the anorexia. Lila says she'd never heard of the disease until she was hospitalized. She says that it seems like nothing more than a game and theorizes that the reason only white girls are affected is that they - unlike blacks - have never been hungry for lack of food. The fact of always having had food available makes those girls willing and able to see their dieting as a game, according to Lila.

Sandy is not a medical doctor but a Ph.D. He has expected to have problems at the hospital because of his lack of medical training and is pleasantly surprised on this point. Dr. Donaldson calls him to talk over the plan for hyperalimentation in Francesca's case. Sandy admits that he should have been euphoric over the fact that he wasn't being shunned by the medical staff at the hospital, but notes that he is too upset over the current state of events to be really happy. Dr. Donaldson, who along with Dr. Jarvis is treating Francesca, says that he hasn't seen a cure among anorexics and that he fears they haven't got much chance of saving Francesca.



# Chapters 17 through 19

## Chapters 17 through 19 Summary

Grace, who has kept Susanna updated about Francesca's condition, asks her to come home for a few weeks. She writes Gregg as well, who says he can't get away but promises to call Francesca. He does and tells her to gain the weight back and get out of the hospital, that he's always known she could do whatever she set her mind to accomplish. Francesca admits to incredible jealousies of both her brother and sister. She recalls that her parents fawned over Susanna at length when she was about to leave for California. Francesca imagines that when she prepares to leave home her parents will barely take time to say goodbye. Though she seems to be exaggerating the situation, even Grace says that she hasn't written Gregg about Francesca's condition because he didn't need to worry about anything more than his education and his summer job. After the phone conversation with Gregg, Francesca is angry, which prompts Lila to say that Francesca should tell her brother what she thinks rather than putting on a smiling face for him and calling him "A-number-one-all-American-pain-in-the-ass". But when Lila questions Francesca more, she admits that it's because he wouldn't like her if she were to voice her depression to him.

Francesca hides food on several occasions, once going so far as to hide an entire lunch tray and say she hadn't gotten any lunch. When the room begins to smell, Lila tells the nurse who searches for the odor and finds the food. Francesca is angry, screaming out that she hid it so that she could eat it later if she wanted. The nurse replies that Francesca can have a snack at any time but she retorts that she doesn't want to have to ask. The entire argument is moot because Francesca is eating almost nothing, and hiding the food was largely pointless. The nurse ends the conversation by saying that if she does this again they'll search her room after every meal. Myrna tells her she's got to be more crafty about it and laughs at Francesca when she denies that she was planning to binge eat and then vomit up the food.

Sandy jokingly calls them the trio - he, Francesca and pole on which her feeding bag is mounted. But he realizes that they make a sad sight and continues to fear for Francesca. Then comes the day when she breaks down and begins to cry, telling him that she is alone and never belongs in any situation. Asked about her family, she says that Susanna and Gregg have always been loved while she has never belonged. Sandy, betting on his experiences with other anorexic teens and his book knowledge, suggests that she makes herself unapproachable in order to avoid rejection. Sandy next suggests that she probably creates a number of rituals in order to make herself feel safe. Francisca first resists then begins a list which includes cutting food into portions, planning what to eat and what will be untouched, dividing the price of a particular item in addition to the calories, never seating herself on the toilet seat, and many more. Sandy points out that it seems she has little time for anything other than these rituals. He says the next step is for them to share lunch so that she can show him how her rituals work. Though she argues, he refuses to give in and they are seated together for lunch in the



hospital office he uses the following Thursday. By the time he's finished his lunch, Francesca has divided her Salisbury steak into portions, poured her cup exactly half full of tomato juice and hasn't eaten anything. Sandy continues to push, telling her that he believes she's afraid, but that she's come to use the fear of getting fat as a substitute for what she really fears.

Sandy leads Francesca to a mirror and asks her to look at her arm. She admits that it's somewhere between "just right" and "too thin" and that most people would say it's too thin. Sandy asks why she thinks so and she says she knows he wants her to say that it's because she's too thin.

## Chapters 17 through 19 Analysis

There is a developing relationship between Myrna and Francesca, though Francesca will come to see Myrna for what she is and to hate what she represents.. Myrna says that she is determined to be the best anorexic ever and brags about the lowest weight she can achieve. She taunts Francesca for not being able to walk far after having the tube inserted. Francesca says all she wants is to get out of the hospital while Myrna says she might want to leave, but that it won't be until after Francesca leaves. Lila points to this "competition" as another reason to think Myrna - and Francesca - are crazy. Lila tells Francesca that she looks striped from the veins that show through her skin. She doesn't tell Francesca the truly revolting part of her appearance, the hair that covers almost her entire body. Francesca herself had noticed the hair and took it as a sign that her body was healthy and protecting itself against the cold that she constantly feels since losing so much weight.

It's about this time that Francesca begins fantasizing about what her life would be like with Sandy as her father. As a youngster, she would imagine herself as queen of a kingdom and all her friends as her loyal subjects. Now she imagines herself as a princess who lives in a world of chaos and danger but is safe within the walls of the castle protected by her father, Sandy the King. She feels no disloyalty to her own father on this point and seems to hold on to this imagery for security as she loses her hold on the fears related to food.



# Chapters 20 through 22

## Chapters 20 through 22 Summary

Francesca eats part of a container of chocolate pudding she'd stolen from an earlier dinner tray without realizing it is soured. She wakes hours later with diarrhea and finally calls a nurse for help. The nurse who arrives is the same one who searched for the smell coming from the room and she quickly discovers the remainder of the pudding, giving Francesca something for the stomach ache and promising punishment.

Grace picks up Susanna at the airport. Susanna has agreed to be involved with the family meeting set for the following day. She, her parents, and Francesca are to meet with Sandy. Susanna asks if Gregg is coming home and Grace says he "can't possibly get away". Susanna says Gregg "isn't really part of our family anymore".

As soon as Hal arrives home that night, he and Susanna begin arguing. Hal's initial comment sounds - even to his own ears - unkind. He calls her "the prodigal daughter", and the conversation erupts into a fight about the fact that Susanna continues to cash the checks he sends her. Even with their argument, Susanna notes that whatever has been wrong with Francesca seems to have made her parents closer to each other. Hal says that he doesn't understand why this happened to Francesca, "of all the children for this to happen to", Susanna says that he really means that it should have happened to Susanna instead, because Francesca is the good daughter and Susanna the trouble maker. Grace intervenes, saying that's not what Hal said, and Susanna counters. The argument escalates and Grace eventually interrupts with an observation - that they'd begun by talking about Francesca's illness and had moved immediately into an argument about Susanna. Susanna says it's "the story of my life", and Grace counters that it seems also to be "the story of your sister's life too". Grace says that perhaps that's part of what's wrong with Francesca.

At the hospital, Sandy says that he'd wanted a chance to see the family dynamics in action. He refers to Francesca as "Kessa", which catches Susanna's attention. She says that changing her name is a good way for Francesca to change her image - from one of the two good children of the Dietrich family. Sandy says that it seems important to realize that Francesca is not sitting with the family and that she is taking backstage to her sister, even when she is the purpose of the meeting. Sandy points out that if Francesca gets attention only when she was ill, she really has no reason to get better. He says that Francesca must be rewarded for good behavior as well as bad. Hal says that looking good and feeling good should be reward in itself, and that should be sufficient to make Francesca stop starving herself. Sandy says point-blank that it's not.

Sandy asks Francesca if she always sits alone and away from the family. She hesitates and he insists that she has to answer. Grace wants Sandy to stop pushing Francesca, saying that she's ill. Sandy says part of the problem seems to be that everyone is relieved that Francesca seems willing to remain out of the arguments. Grace suggests





to Hal that another of Sandy's points is legitimate, that people can look at things differently without being "wrong". Susanna says her mother is right and Hal immediately says that Susanna's "opinion may carry weight at the commune", but that he isn't interested. Sandy interrupts, pointing out that they've just moved the conversation again from Francesca to Susanna.

Sandy asks each of the family members what they want and gets answers that relate to a peaceful home until he comes to Francesca, and this time he insists that she answer. She begins to cry, saying that she doesn't want to need her family, but that she does. She points out that she's never asked for any of the material possessions she has and that all that really matters to her is the love and attention of her family, and that those are things she doesn't get. She goes on to accuse her mother of even disliking her. Grace objects, saying it's not true, but Sandy interrupts, saying that the only important part of Francesca's tirade is that she has those feelings. The meeting ends with Sandy saying that the family's job now is to find a way to help Francesca continue to express her needs and desires, and to listen to them. Sandy then explains to them that the anorexia is merely a manifestation of Francesca's compulsions and obsessions, and that all the rituals - including her control over food - is merely a way Francesca has managed to protect herself from her obsessions.

As Grace, Hal, and Susanna drive home, they are each lost in thought. Hal realizes Sandy's points are valid. Susanna denies that she's deliberately tried to upstage Francesca but the accusation weighs heavily on her. Grace can't get past Francesca's accusation that she doesn't love her youngest child, and that she never will. In the hospital, Sandy walks Francesca back to her room. Francesca asks how much longer the tube will have to remain in and he says until she gains five more pounds. She says, "shit", and he merely says, "yeah".

## Chapters 20 through 22 Analysis

While Sandy is earning Francesca's trust, everyone else is seeing changes in Francesca. The medical staff approves and Sandy is called for a meeting with the hospital staff. Dr. Donaldson says that the staff don't really know how to handle anorexics. He says that the girls with the illness are typically angry and difficult, and that the medical staff soon come to despise the girls. Sandy is pleased that Dr. Donaldson has accepted him as part of Francesca's treatment team and that he's willing to listen to what Sandy says on the subject of anorexics. Dr. Donaldson will later admit that he's "eating his words", regarding his early opinion of what can be done for girls with anorexia. He had said that there's no cure and that the best anyone can do is hope to provide the girls with a way to cope. Now he seems to want to be certain that the hospital staff are willing and able to act and react in ways that will help the girls rather than adding to the problems they face.

Sandy himself is coming to realize that he may be too close to Francesca. He admits that she's taken a large amount of his time and that he has even skipped dinner with his own two daughters in order to eat dinner with Francesca. He also admits that he was



deeply upset when Francesca ate the pudding and became ill, though he knows that treating patients is often a case of taking one step forward and one or even two backwards. As he's thinking these thoughts, he arrives at his own office to find Francesca calling, upset that he'd allowed her to eat so much at their shared lunch just after his meeting with hospital staff. Sandy again goes through his reassurances but again remembers that Dr. Donaldson had once said that the best anyone could hope for was to help a girl manage the illness because there is no cure.



# Chapters 23 through 25

## Chapters 23 through 25 Summary

Myrna delivers lunch trays and helps other patients as soon as she's released from her punishment. Francesca argues that if Myrna is so strong, why is she still in the hospital. Though Myrna argues the points, Francesca seems to be seeing anorexia through the eyes of another. Later, Francesca looks anxiously at herself in the mirror and says that she is ugly. She says that she deserves to look this way because she is "ugly on the inside".

Francesca later talks to Sandy about Myrna, and Sandy says he can't help Francesca solve her evolving problems with Myrna, but that he'll continue to talk with Francesca about it whenever she wants. Armed with that assurance, Francesca goes to talk with Myrna. Francesca says she's through with being sick and has come to the conclusion that Myrna isn't really sick. Francesca says that she's miserable while she's sick and that Myrna is showing all the signs of playing a game and enjoying herself. Myrna says that "anorexics never get better", and Francesca says she is going to. When Myrna later sees Francesca walking up and down the hall, she accuses Francesca of trying to burn off calories, and the accusation sends Francesca into a panic. She immediately calls Sandy for reassurance. As Sandy hangs up, his phone rings again. This time it's Dr. Bernie Donaldson, who asks him to take on Myrna as a patient. Sandy hesitates, saying that if he takes on Myrna, two of his patients will know each other and that it will mean he is treating four anorexics at the same time. Dr. Donaldson jokes that he can't advise Sandy on the ethics of the situation and that Sandy, as the "shrink", will have to work out his own problems. Sandy agrees to see Myrna.

Sandy arrives on another day in Francesca's room to find she's writing a letter to Gregg, expressing her feelings and telling him that he's a "shit" for not making time to visit her in the hospital. Sandy says that the important point is that she feels Gregg should have visited her and that she's expressing that feeling. Then Sandy says that Francesca, who has been in the hospital for almost three months, is ready to go home.

On the day she's to be released from the hospital, Hal takes off work. When Grace says she can go get Francesca alone, Hal says that he took off work the day she was hospitalized and that this day is every bit as important, a fact they both realize is true. In the hospital, Francesca is preparing to leave. She has about an hour before they're due to arrive to get her and she wanders into the dayroom where some children are playing games. Three girls are at a Monopoly game and Francesca walks over, asking if she can join their game.



## Chapters 23 through 25 Analysis

At a later meeting with Sandy, Francesca eats half a sandwich and drinks half a cup of milk but then says she's full. She really is because her stomach has shrunk so much and Sandy doesn't argue the point. Francesca says that she's still worried about gaining too much weight and asks Sandy about her body's reaction to regaining weight. Sandy says that her ankles will swell, her stomach will appear distended until she gets some fat back onto her body, that she'll notice the fat on her thighs and buttocks first, and that the hair on her body will gradually fall out as the hair on her head thickens. He says it will take time and urges her to remember that she still isn't able to make decisions for herself when it comes to weight, so that he is now the official judge of whether she's overweight. He says that if he sees that she's gaining too much, he'll tell her and help her diet sensibly. He points out that she doesn't yet have the ability to judge on that point.

Later, Francesca calls Sandy, anxious that she might have eaten too much at lunch, and Sandy again goes through all the reassurances. He points out that this turmoil - though scary - is normal and a sign of progress. He asks her to consider how often he's been right about her emotions and what's happening and she has to admit that it's been often. Based on that, he asks her to trust him again and she eventually calms down, though the emotional upheaval will continue to be a problem.



# Characters

## Francesca Dietrich

Francesca is the daughter of Hal and Grace and the younger sister of Gregg and Susanna. Throughout her life she has given over center stage to Susanna, and at fifteen, her feelings of not belonging manifest as anorexia. Francesca, longing for a career in dance, comes to crave the approval of her ballet teacher above all else. She gives up her free time for extra classes and practice and gives up food in an effort to be thinner, as her teacher indicates is necessary. Francesca soon relates the need to be thinner with success and spends all her time on countless rituals, including cutting food into tiny pieces and moving them around on her plate so that it appears she's eaten but in truth is only consuming a hundred or so calories a day.

She begins calling herself Kessa and relates Francesca to the "fat" version of herself and Kessa to the slender version who is really in control. When her weight drops from ninety-eight to less than seventy-five, she's hospitalized and soon undergoes a procedure to insert a feeding tube into her chest, similar to an IV, but that sends nourishment directly into the jugular vein. Through all this, Francesca hates those who tell her she's too thin and who would force her to eat. Then she begins to forge a relationship with a psychologist, Sandy Sherman. A young man himself, Sandy is soon caught up in Francesca's problems. He sees the point where he could possibly break through with her and does manage to reach her, though Francesca would continue to have some serious issues over the course of the coming weeks with emotions ranging from all-out fear to hope of a normal life.

## Sandy Sherman

Sandy is a psychologist who happens to have a conversation with Francesca's pediatrician regarding some recent cases of anorexia. Sandy says he's has some limited success and his reports on this front are sufficient for a recommendation from the pediatrician that Francesca begin seeing Sandy. His approach is completely different from other people and he is soon caught up in Francesca's fight to overcome her fears that almost cost her her life. Sandy believes that Francesca is afraid, but not of the food as she claims. Instead, he believes her fears are simply easier to manage if she swears that she's afraid of the food than to face what really frightens her. With this in mind, he leads her down a road of self-discovery that eventually involves her entire family. As Sandy becomes ever more deeply mired in Francesca's problems, he realizes that he's having trouble keeping a professional distance. Francesca's path to recovery comes before Sandy's own conflict becomes too great, though it provides insight he'd never had before caring for Francesca.



## Hal Dietrich

Francesca's father. Hal, whose full name is Harold, has worked hard to provide for his children and is proud of that fact. He is accustomed to taking charge of situations and seems especially vulnerable when he admits that he can't solve Francesca's problems and agrees to seek medical help. When it's pointed out to him that Francesca - at the center of everyone's attention while she was ill but largely overlooked as the "good child" when she was healthy - really has no reason to get well, Hal realizes that the assessment is probably correct. On the day Francesca is to be released from the hospital, he takes off work, saying that the day they bring her home is at least as important as the day she was admitted.

## Grace Dietrich

Francesca's mother. Grace herself seems insecure and a child truly in the shadow of her own mother. She admits to comparing herself to others - usually unfavorably. When she's faced with Francesca's accusation that she doesn't love her daughter, Grace objects, but Sandy points out that the only piece of important information is that Francesca feels it is so. Grace seems to feel guilty because Francesca wasn't a planned child.

## Dr. Evelyn Gordon

Francesca's pediatrician and the physician who first suspects Francesca is suffering from anorexia, though she doesn't immediately voice her concern. When she doesn't hear from the Dietricks for some time, she assumes the issue has been resolved, but becomes involved again after Francesca has lost even more weight. Dr. Gordon threatens hospitalization, a threat that Francesca continues to see as idle until Dr. Gordon comes to believe she has no choice but to admit Francesca.

## Susanna Dietrich

Francesca's sister, who is living in a commune in California as the story opens, though she's thinking about moving to a different place. There is a constant and ongoing conflict between Susanna and her father, with Grace typically trying to sit in the middle to diffuse the situation as much as possible. After the family session with Sandy, Susanna is uncomfortably aware that she has tended to steal center stage most of her life and seems to understand why Francesca could feel left out.

## Myrna

A girl who has anorexia and who is hospitalized at the same time as Francesca. She's the other "skinny" currently on the adolescent ward and prides herself on being the best



anorexic anywhere. It seems that seeing Myrna for what she is helps Francesca see herself as well. Myrna and Francesca eventually clash, and it's a sign of Francesca's healing that she's able and ready to stand up for herself to this girl.

## **Lila**

Lila is a young black girl who is in the hospital because she had surgery for a club foot, and who shares a room with Francesca. Lila hears a nurse's aide telling Francesca that she must be "a skinny" and predicting that Francesca will soon be too ill to walk and will have tubes running into her body. Lila has advice for Francesca that evolves as she comes to learn more about Francesca and her disease. Lila says that the reason only young white girls have the disease is that they have never had to go hungry for lack of food.

## **Gregg**

Francesca's brother who attends school at Harvard. Francesca refers to Gregg as the favored of the Dietrich children. When he calls Francesca in the hospital, she puts on a cheerful tone, saying that had she sounded depressed he would not have liked her. Later, she says that Gregg, when faced with any problem, runs away, though he does it with an attitude that intimates that there's no way Gregg - who is perfect - could run from a situation.

## **Dr. Alexander Smith**

The first psychiatrist Francesca sees. She meets him for six visits and goes through a range of emotions, including distrust and amusement. Then she simply stops attending their weekly meetings and the doctor doesn't alert her parents, so that it's several weeks before they discover that she has stopped.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Park Avenue and Ninety-Sixth**

The location of Dr. Smith's office.

### **Northeast Hospital**

Where Francesca is taken after her weight drops to below seventy-five pounds.

### **Manhattan**

Where Francesca lives with her parents.

### **Hyperalimentation**

The means by which Francesca is fed during her stay in the hospital. The procedure involves inserting a tube directly into the jugular vein.

### **California**

Where Susanna is now living in a commune.

### **Harvard**

Where Gregg attends school.

### **Madison Avenue**

Where Francesca goes to a coffee shop before her skipped appointment with Sandy.

### **Central Park**

Where Francesca plans to walk prior to an appointment with Dr. Gordon and where she finds herself assaulted by the smell and sight of food, sending her into a panic that makes her late for her appointment.





## **The Dayroom**

A common area in the hospital where patients meet for games and to spend time together.

## **Fifty-Second Street**

Where the dance studio is located.



# Themes

## The Need for Attention

After Sandy spends extensive time with Francesca, it becomes obvious that her need for positive attention is a major aspect of her illness. Francesca eventually comes to tell Sandy and her family that she feels unloved, though it takes time for her to realize those feelings herself. During a family session, she says that her mother has never loved her, "and never will". That need for love and attention has become so great in Francesca's mind that she comes to expect that she'll be the outcast in any situation. The spiraling needs and inability to recognize and express them eventually manifests in the desire to take control of her own eating and bodily habits.

As Francesca comes to know more about Myrna, it seems likely that Myrna's own need for attention is similarly at the root of her illness as well. Myrna says that she's never "needed" anyone, and that it's a good thing because she's never had anyone. While it's true that Myrna is able to care for herself, it seems evident that she needs the attention and affection craved by all teenage girls.

Francesca and Myrna aren't alone in this craving for attention. Both Sandy and Grace point out that Susanna has the ability to control every conversation so that it becomes an argument about her, and that Hal is willing to fall for that ploy every time Susanna does so. While Susanna is anxious to say she doesn't like this kind of attention, it seems that she does and that she craves it as fully as Francesca.

## The Will to Live

Francesca doesn't seem to realize that she's putting her life in jeopardy while she's starving herself. For example, she begins to grow a mat of hair on her body and takes that to mean that her body is strong and is trying to make up for the fact that she's constantly cold. She takes the sign of the dropping weight as a sign that she's strong enough to resist the temptation of food. She believes that the threat of hospitalization is an empty one until it comes to pass. Through all the warnings of what she's doing to her health, Francesca refuses to listen and to believe. Even when Francesca passes out in the middle of the night, she doesn't really realize that she could die.

It's only when she sees the evidence on the body of another anorexic - Myrna - that she realizes that the intense habits she's formed have put her very life in danger. She comes to admit that she's afraid of the obsessions that have caused her to stop eating and that she doesn't want to die. This eventual realization of the seriousness of her situation comes before it's too late for Francesca to recover. It may seem that Myrna is a hopeless case, but she may also come to realize that she does want to live. It seems that the important factor for Francesca became her ability to reconcile her need for attention with her will to live.



## The Need for Boundaries

Sandy Sherman is a psychologist who is treating two other anorexics when he begins treating Francesca, so he already knows that treating these cases takes significant time and commitment. Francesca soon comes to know his phone number by heart and calls him often, though his rule is that she can only talk to him at ten minutes before each hour during the day so that she's not interrupting time with other patients. On the occasion she does call during one of his sessions, he's firm and tells her that he'll call her back when the session is completed. She feels she is in crisis and can't wait, but she does. A similar setting of boundaries occurs very early in their relationship. Sandy comes to believe that they are beginning to connect and Francesca shares the feeling. Sandy is excited over the prospect and Francesca is frightened, which prompts her to skip a session with him. Sandy calls her home that evening and tells her that it's not acceptable. He says that if she misses another session without phoning, he'll assume she doesn't want to continue and will "cross her off his list". Sandy tells Grace that similar boundaries must be set so that Francesca doesn't manipulate her parents to be angry at the medical staff or create other problems among those who are trying to help her.

While setting these boundaries is ultimately good for Francesca, Sandy finds that he himself has crossed a boundary with her. He is overly caught up in his desire to help her and takes her failures and setbacks personally. He also comes to question the fact that he has devoted so much to her, saying that he's skipped dinner with his own daughters. He realizes that if that happens often, his own children will come to feel that their father cares more for the sick people he treats than for them.

# Style

## Point of View

The book is written in third person from an omniscient point of view. This is the only option that would have worked to tell this story because the opinions, thoughts, and ideas of various characters are necessary in order to fully relate the story. The author does an adequate job of presenting the inner thoughts of the characters through several methods, including conversations. For example, the interaction and relationship between Susanna and her parents is presented through the eyes of Francesca and her parents, then later through the eyes of Sandy as he observes the three in a family session at the hospital. Similar aspects of the lives of Francesca and her family are offered in multiple ways so that the reader has a more complete understanding of what turns out to be an important aspect of Francesca's illness - her family.

## Setting

The story is set in New York, New York. Many of the places described by Francesca are real. For example, Central Park West really exists and visitors to that area may actually find that there are more food vendors than they thought possible. To a young girl who is absolutely set on avoiding consuming any food - especially junk food - Francesca's observations of that area seem perfectly reasonable. The streets described really exist and are acceptably presented. The fact that the setting is real lends credence to the story itself.

The people are fictional but are created from a series of anorexic patients treated by the author, Steven Levankron. This fact may also lend an air of believability for some readers. Though Francesca and her family - as a unit - don't exist, the fact of the authority of the author will likely sway readers to understand that they could exist in different cities with different names and in varying circumstances.

The time is never specifically identified, though the book was copyrighted in 1979 and reissued in 1997. The fact that Susanna is living in California in "a commune" setting makes it reasonable to believe that the story is set in the 1970s.

## Language and Meaning

The book is written in an easily understood style. Though there are some medical terms, their use is not so frequent as to cause problems for an average reader. The terms that are important - hyperalimentation, for example - are explained in laymen's terms that are easily understood. The story is appropriately divided between exposition and dialogue and the conversations seem reasonable and realistic.



The story itself is one of courage and hope, though many readers may find the story line depressing and sad. The fact that the book ends before Francesca's life ends may be a problem for some readers who want a solid, end-of-the-story conclusion. The subject matter itself, which is the disease and its impact of individuals and their families, is not one that lends itself to happily-ever-after conclusions. The fact that recovery is not common and that many of the girls never succeed in sloughing off the problems that put their lives in jeopardy means that Francesca's story won't end until the end of her life. It's left to the reader to decide how successful her treatment continues to be. The novel does end on a hopeful note, possibly meant as a sign that Francesca had a complete recovery and that Sandy's methods were successful.

## Structure

The book is divided into twenty-five chapters of greatly varying lengths. For example, the final chapter is a single page, though some chapters are eighteen pages or so. The chapters are only numbered and there are no titles to offer clues as to what might occur. There is a short poem at the beginning of the book that reads, "Fat and Skinny had a race; All around the pillow case. Fat fell down and broke her face. Skinny said, "Ha-ha, I won the race". This personification of "Fat" and "Skinny" are a foreshadowing of the battle Francesca will fight within herself and that seems to be at the heart of the illness itself.

Francesca's tendency to refer to herself as "Kessa" may be interpreted as her own struggle to reinvent herself. The use of this alternate name by Francesca herself and Sandy is in direct contract to the fact that her parents and others call her Francesca, though most readers will soon realize that the two are the same person with different personae. For the sake of continuity, the character is referred to as Francesca throughout this guide.



## Quotes

"She was fat. Worse than that, she was a monster. A five-foot-four-ninety-eight-pound monster." Chap. 1, p. 10

"Grace was relying on the physician to do her persuading for her, and Kessa was too apprehensive to speak. Dr. Gordon would see her in her underwear. Worse yet, Dr. Gordon would read the numbers of the scale, and scales, especially in doctors' offices, didn't lie." Chap. 3, p. 37

"Grace had made a mental list for Dr. Gordon, and now she could add the urine stains to it. She had no idea what was the matter with her daughter, but she did know now with a stomach-tightening certainty that something was wrong." Chap. 4, p. 65

"She must protect Kessa at all costs. She'd lie as much as necessary, but the doctor must not find out about Kessa and all the important habits and practices that kept her alive." Chap. 7, p. 82

"She hated everything cheerful that afternoon, and every Park Avenue mother whose daughter wasn't anorexic. She tried to console herself with the thought that these people had other problems, but there was no solace in the idea. What were bad marriages or rebellious children or financial setbacks compared to a daughter determined to starve herself to death?" Chap. 7, p. 90

"Kessa's body was starving for food but her mind was drowning in it." Chap. 9, p. 106

"Kessa heard the words and shut them out. They had been threatening her with the hospital for months now. All of them. But she was still free." Chap. 10, p. 121

"She wanted to turn down the air-conditioner but couldn't figure out how it worked. It's so damn cold, she thought. Anorexics are always cold. It was the first time she'd thought of herself as an anorexic. The hospital was getting to her. She was beginning to believe she was sick after all." Chap. 14, p. 142

"The girl was horribly thin, and her clothes hung on her as they would on a hanger. As the girl passed her, she looked curiously at Kessa, but Kessa kept her eyes fixed straight ahead. The girl was obviously what the nurse's aide called a skinny, and Kessa couldn't stand the sight of skinnies." Chap. 15, p. 157

"She lay there for a while thinking of Shady Sherman's words, vacillating between panic at her loss of control over her body and relief that someone else had finally taken over." Chap. 16, p. 176

"Nurturing Kessa - that's what it'd come to call it to himself - was one thing, but losing his own professional distance was another. And of course he had lost his professional distance." Chap. 20, p. 219

"But now she found Myrna too unpleasant to tolerate. I suppose all anorexics are like that, Kessa thought. And that means I'm like that too. She confronted her image in the mirror. Suddenly, she looked as ugly as her parents and all the doctors had told her she did." Chap. 23, p. 237

"If I took time off to put her in the hospital, I can damn well take time off to bring her home." Chap. 25, p. 253

## Topics for Discussion

Describe Francesca. Compare that description to "Kessa." How does Kessa come into being? What does Susanna say about Kessa?

Who is Grace? Describe her insecurities. How do those compare to Francesca's?

Who is Hal? What is his reaction when he discovers Francesca isn't eating properly? What regimen and rules does Hal implement? How does Francesca cope with these? Are they successful?

How does Francesca see herself? Her sister? Her brother? What is significant about the fact that Francesca sits apart from her parents and sister during the family conference with Sandy?

How does Francesca react to the Dr. Smith? Dr. Gordon? Dr. Waldman? Dr. Donaldson? Compare those with her initial reaction to Sandy Sherman. How is Sandy's attitude different from the beginning? Why does Francesca accept his statement that he's taking control of her health when she's resisted the attempts of others?

Why does Francesca allow her grades to fall? What are the reactions of her parents at this news?

What is it about Myrna that attracts Francesca's attention? Repels it? What role does Myrna play in Francesca's eventual acceptance of her own appearance?

The book ends before Francesca's story ends. What might have become of her? Why do you think this is the case? What is Myrna's likely fate?