

SARAH SIMPSON'S RULES FOR LIVING

1. Don't lie.
2. Don't trust anybody but cats.
3. Don't expect happy endings.
4. Drink skim milk.
5. Avoid blondes.

JANUARY 1

It is New Year's Day, and I have decided to keep a journal. Sally, my mother, says this is a good idea because I got a journal for Christmas from my aunt Kate and if I don't write in it, what else am I going to do with it?

"You can keep your lists in it," Andrea said.

Andrea is Sally's best friend, and she does not approve of lists. There are two kinds of people in the world, says Andrea: the list makers and the free spirits. Andrea is a free spirit. She has lots of frizzy hair in dreadlocks, and she wears big clanky jewelry and clothes in loud patterns that are not flattering to her hips. Andrea teaches Women's Studies and Gender and Social Issues at Pelham State College, right across the hall from where Sally teaches English literature.

People who make lists, says Andrea, are putting all their time in boxes and not leaving themselves open to new experiences like suddenly buying a parrot or going to Italy for the weekend.

But I think lists are a way of putting your thoughts in order. Also I think it is important to plan.

REASONS WHY ANDREA SHOULD MAKE LISTS

1. She is always forgetting her appointments with her therapist.
2. Whenever she promises to bring something over for dessert, she ends up leaving it at home in her refrigerator.

So then Sally said that people often start journals by introducing themselves. So that is what I am going to do.

My name is Sarah Elizabeth Simpson. I am twelve years old. I have orange hair and I am fat.

Sally says it's baby fat, but that sounds like crap to me. Emily Harris, who is blond and thin and the most popular girl in my class, does not have baby fat.

Sally and I live in Pelham, Vermont, at the very edge of town, where the sidewalk ends and the woods begin. We have two cats, named Virginia Woolf and Samuel Johnson, though we mostly call them Ginger and Sam. Ginger is almost as old as I am, but Sam is just a kitten. He is a replacement for Charles Dickens, who vanished last year under mysterious circumstances. We suspect Mr. Binns, an

unfriendly neighbor who has scrubby little chickens and a shotgun.

My father does not live with us anymore. He lives in Los Angeles, California, with his new wife, who is a tennis instructor named Kim.

THINGS I DO NOT LIKE ABOUT KIM

1. She wears a Wonderbra.
2. She has long blond hair that she's always flinging around to make sure that everybody notices that she has long blond hair.
3. She is boring to talk to.
4. She giggles through her nose.

Kim looks exactly like a Barbie doll. Andrea, when I'm not supposed to be listening, refers to Kim and my father as Barbie and Ken and asks how life is going at Barbie's Malibu Beach House. Actually my father and Kim do not have a beach house. They live in a development about five minutes from the beach. I saw a picture of it. All the houses are painted pink and pale blue and lime green and look like brand-new candy boxes.

Our house is old and white and peely, and part of the back porch is falling down.

My mother has a boyfriend named Jonah. She doesn't call him her boyfriend. She says he's just a good friend. But I can see the handwriting on the wall. He's here practically all the time, with his little boy, whose name is George. I think that's a stodgy name for a little kid. If I had a little boy, I'd name him Vladimir.

George has shaggy brown hair, and he's always dragging this ratty stuffed bear around.

THINGS I DO NOT LIKE ABOUT JONAH

1. He always sits in the cats' chair.
2. He is not nearly as good-looking as my father.
He is going bald on top, and he has a potbelly.
3. He drives a horrible old blue van with bumper stickers all over it that say things like SAVE THE WHALES and VISUALIZE WHIRLED PEAS.
4. He sings stupid songs.
5. He has a beard.

Later

It is New Year's Day night. I am the only one awake. Sally and the cats are asleep. George and Jonah have gone home.

George and Jonah were here for dinner, which was pot roast and potato pancakes. Most people have ham at New Year's, but we don't because I won't eat pigs because of Piglet. Piglet is my favorite *Pooh* character. Jonah eats pigs, but not around me.

Jonah brought a bottle of champagne for him and Sally and a bottle of sparkling cider for me and George. Then he proposed toasts.

THINGS WE TOASTED

1. Good friends.
2. The future.
3. The Revolution.
4. Bears.

"What Revolution?" I said, and Jonah said that the Revolution is when the good people take over the world and everybody uses solar power and eats organic vegetables.

After dinner we went for a walk in the snow. The snow was coming down in fat fluffy flakes like the snow in a snow globe. If you looked straight up into the snow, you could imagine that everything was upside down and you were falling into the sky.

George went running ahead with his bear and his stupid floppy boots, trying to catch snowflakes on his tongue, and Jonah took Sally's hand and tucked it through his arm. Sally can say he's just a friend all she wants, but I know better.

Then they started talking about their New Year's resolutions. Sally's is the same every year: "Simplify, simplify." That's a quote from Henry David Thoreau. Sally thinks that life is too cluttered and needs to be pared down. I can think of things to pare down too, but mine are not the same as Sally's.

George's resolution is to grow enough so that he can ride the Mountain of Death roller coaster next summer at the Pelham Fair. Short little kids are not allowed on the Mountain of Death roller coaster. George is five and small for his age. Jonah asked me what my resolutions were and I said I didn't know.

Jonah has not made any resolutions yet either, but I could think of some.

RESOLUTIONS FOR JONAH

1. Lose 25 pounds.
2. Sell the van.
3. Throw out that shirt with the sea horses on it.
4. Quit singing "We Shall Overcome."
5. Shave.

I just looked up *resolution* in the dictionary that I got for Christmas from my aunt Elaine. Aunt Elaine always gives improving presents, like wool socks and yoga mats.

resolution (n.) 1. A resolute temper;
boldness and firmness of purpose.
2. An intention.

MY RESOLUTIONS FOR THE NEW YEAR

1. Get rid of Kim.
2. Get rid of Jonah.
3. Dye my hair.
4. Change my name and move to Australia.

JANUARY 2

Just barely

It is almost one o'clock in the morning, but I can't get to sleep. Thoughts keep going around in my head.

New Year's Day is the anniversary of the day my whole life changed. Last year this was the day my father left. Before he went, we had a talk and he told me all about how married people sometimes grow in different directions and about meeting Kim and realizing that she was his soul mate and how the new year is a time for new beginnings.

"A new beginning for all of us, pumpkin," he said. But I don't see how it was a new beginning for Sally and me. I think if he really loved me, he would have stayed home.

Also I hate it when he calls me pumpkin.

Andrea says that Kim is a calculating bimbo, but Sally says no and that anyway the divorce was her fault too, because she and my father got married too young and they turned out not to have much in common, except me.

I don't see that Sally has much in common with Jonah either.