



January Is My Favourite Month

by Francine Matthews (found on the Internet)

Years ago, when I had small boys underfoot, my sister Liz sent me a slim little book entitled *A Round of Applause for Mrs. Claus*. It lays out the theory that women make the holidays go around – that without us, men would wander through the soulless winter solstice without a cheering flame or the crinkle of gift wrap. In my household, this is indisputable. I appear to be the only person capable of stringing lights on an evergreen as they ought to be strung, or of filling the outdoor urns with trailing juniper and fake red hydrangeas, or of cooking a pancetta-wrapped fillet of beef with wild mushrooms as it must be cooked. I alone remember that one sister likes mail-order ice cream and another mail-order cheese. Someone has to carry the weight of civilization. In the Matthews family, it is I: Mrs. Claus.

Which is why I am generally knocked down for the count with some sort of noxious disease as the clock tolls twelve on December 25th. I'm worn out from sustaining the holidays for a multitude. This year it was double pinkeye, which my elder son brought home from the Ivy League. It made me look like Voldemort by New Year's Eve. Some years it's flu. But every year, I toddle into the cold embrace of January with as much relief as if it were England regained after four years in The Somme.

If April is the cruelest month, January is the best. If it did not exist, if it had somehow been left out of the plan for the year because it was too busy organizing its off-season getaway to Dubrovnik or Puerto Vallarta, it would be necessary for us to invent January.

We all know it's a time of fresh starts. That's obvious. Regardless of whether you keep your resolutions, it's a pause—a caesura, in fact—between the cynicism of a year played-out and the hope of a year yet begun. I wake up on New Year's Day ready to strip the house of greens and red ribbons and toss everything in the trash. I strip beds. I strip my closet. I strip the dogs. I clean out my refrigerator.

And then, once the college kid has flown back to college and the high school kid has schlepped off to the first day of his final semester, I walk downstairs and enter my office.

It's been quiet and dark for a few weeks, now.

But January – time of lung-stopping cold, of drifting flakes, of landscapes sunk in monochrome, of the soft swish of tires on icy streets, of the silence of a single bird call against the frigid morning branches of a bare tree – January is waiting.

It offers a clean, spare, bracing road forward. It offers lowering skies that deny any impulse to fritter away time by wandering out of doors. It offers hair pulled back and monkish discipline. January is the Marine Corps of months.

I sit down at my desk. I pull up and open a file I haven't touched in thirty days. It is the book half-gestated, almost stillborn, I left unfinished in December. But it is the book I will write and sell in the next few months.

January gives us this power: the cold, clear, commitment to hard work and good dreams. This month, I wish you discipline and focus. I wish you long hours. I wish you dedication to task and the vital things that come from it.

There's nothing going on outside except traffic accidents and blue language. Put your words to better use indoors, and write down your dreams.

