

PART I · CHAPTER [TBD]

Ephemeral as Material

A Magical Incrustation of Rime

or: how a cold walk on a borrowed morning became my favorite winter arrangement

What stopped me — *a hedgerow on a freezing morning, every twig jeweled with rime, and the thought: I want to make something that looks like this.*

The word *rime* is from the Old English for *crust*. Meteorologically, it is what happens when supercooled fog meets a surface that is just barely below freezing — the moisture flash-crystallizes on whatever it touches and builds up, layer over layer, into a fine, white, almost architectural skin. It is not snow. It is not frost. It is fog made solid in the act of landing. It looks like jewelry. It lasts an hour.

I had not planned to see any rime that day. I had planned to sit in a car. My husband had decided, in the way that husbands decide these things, that the only snow blower worth driving an hour for was a particular model at a particular dealership at a particular distance from home. I went along, as one does, expecting to sit in the showroom and read. I had not brought a book. (We all know that it will take a man just about as long

to buy a new snow blower as… as… it will take a woman to find the perfect man — a very l-o-n-g time.) The dealership had vending-machine coffee and a calendar from 2007. The fields outside were spread with the storm that had passed through the night before. I went for a walk.

VISION

It was one of those mornings the sky writes in poetry instead of prose. The air was sharp in the way that makes your face feel new. I walked along a hedgerow at the edge of an empty field that was probably corn in August and was nothing now. The hedgerow had taken the storm hard — every branch was bent down, every leaf was a small bowl. And every twig and every leaf-edge and every spent seed pod and every stretched cobweb had been *jeweled* by the night: not coated by frost in the way frost coats, but built upon by rime in the way a coral builds upon itself. Crystalline. Layered. White on white on white. The whole hedgerow looked like a chandelier that someone had forgotten and walked past, leaving on the road for the morning to find.

I stood there. The sun was at the angle the sun is at on a January morning in the country. Light passed through the rime, came out the other side warmer than it went in. The hedgerow glowed.

It would have been enough to stand there and look at it.

It would have been enough to walk back to the showroom, sit on the wrong-color couch, drink the bad coffee, and remember it for years. That is what most people would have done. It is what most people do with the beauty they encounter every day.

I am not most people. I stood at the hedgerow another minute, and I thought, with the kind of conviction that arrives wordlessly and only later becomes a sentence: *when I get home I am going to make a floral arrangement that looks like this.* This is the confession the rest of this chapter is built on.



Baby's breath and Artemisia dipped in clear glass glitter.

Most beautiful things you see become memories. A few become projects. The difference is whether you went outside again that afternoon.

GATHER

Once home, I trudged out to my gardens. Pickings were slim at this time of year — a few daylily and iris pods, magnolia branches with a few stray leaves that had managed to withstand the winds, the dried stems of gypsophila (baby's breath), Artemisia, Tricyrtis (toad lily), and Japanese anemone. None of it looked like rime. None of it was supposed to. What it had — what the hedgerow had, more importantly — was the right *shape* for rime. The same brittle, branching, end-of-season geometry. The same downward droop that gives the ice somewhere to land.

A copy is never made of the same material as the original. A copy is made of something that holds the shape.

I went through the house, too. The garden gave me the bones. The house had to give me the surface. From my craft drawer: flat-back glass pebbles, glitter glue, glass glitter, a half-tube of off-white pearlized acrylic paint that had been waiting for a winter to be useful. From my linen

closet: a round vintage doily with scalloped edges whose shapes echoed the curves of the vase I had in mind — the way a foundation drawing on tracing paper echoes the cathedral that will sit on top of it. From the back of a shelf I had not opened since the Christmas before: a string of small fairy lights and a tiny perfume bottle, both abandoned to "I will use these for something one day." Today was one day.

The translation needs a vocabulary, and a vocabulary is always built out of what you happen to already own. **Most houses contain the materials for two or three masterpieces, untranslated.**



Detail: the doily echoing the curves of the vase.

TRANSLATE

I sprayed the baby's breath and the Artemisia with glitter glue, then dipped each stem into the glass glitter — clear, the kind sold for window-display work — for the very ethereal, delicate, icy-crystal look that nothing else in the craft store gives you. I hand-dipped or brush-painted the remaining foliage with the off-white pearlized acrylic. **No spray painting, unless you will be satisfied with inferior results.** This is one of the few rules I keep about anything. Spray paint flattens. Hand paint catches the variation in the surface and reflects it back differently. Rime is not a flat thing — it catches light from many angles at once. The paint had to do the same.

I set the doily on the table. I strewed the glass pebbles across it for the look of melted ice. I built the arrangement up off the doily, vase at the center, the glittered baby's breath threading through the painted magnolia and the iris pods. As I worked, delicate bits and pieces fell off the stems and landed on the doily — exactly as had happened to the foliage on the hedgerow when the wind moved through it. I left every fallen piece where it landed. *That accident is the most honest thing about the arrangement.* Beauty made on a worktable should still look like beauty made by a wind.

For evening charm, I added a very small string of fairy lights at the base — only at the base, never threaded through. The light had to come from underneath, the way the morning sun had been coming from underneath the hedgerow at the angle I had first seen it. To emphasize the serenity, I added a couple of dainty oriental figures, some gilded pine cones, and the small perfume bottle filled with love-in-a-mist seed pods. The seed pods were the last thing in. They are nothing like rime, structurally. But they are the right whisper.



Detail: love-in-a-mist seed pods in the perfume bottle.

It was finished by suppertime. The hedgerow itself was gone by suppertime too — the sun had risen high and the fog had burned off and the rime had melted by mid-morning, as rime always does.

> **A LITTLE SPELL**
>
> **Walk outside today. The first thing you find beautiful — don't take a picture.**
>
> Walk back inside. Open the cabinet you keep your crafty bits in. What do you have on hand that could become what you just saw?
>
> If the answer is *nothing*, you weren't really looking. Go back out.

Principle: Ephemeral as Material. The most permanent things in a beautiful house are often copies of the things that didn't last — the candle's shadow becoming a painted ceiling, the autumn leaf becoming a pressed glass coaster, the rime on the hedgerow becoming a dining-room arrangement that sits on the table until April. Ephemeral things don't ask to be saved. They ask to be *answered.*

The arrangement is still on my sideboard as I write this. The hedgerow is gone. So is the snow blower — we got the wrong one and returned it the following Saturday. Most of what we drove out that morning to get, we did not get.

What I saw on the hedgerow is now in my dining room. That is the only kind of magic I have ever believed in.



The arrangement at rest.