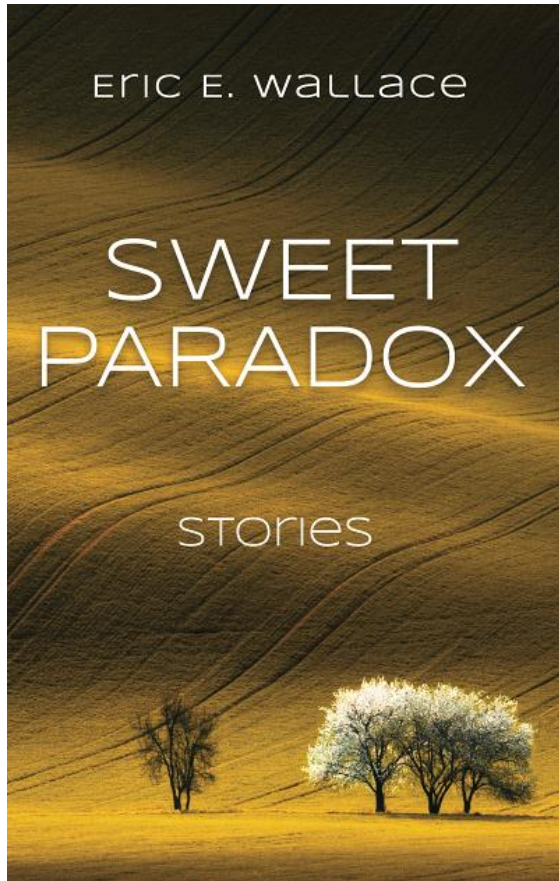




With settings around the world, here are seventeen engaging short stories and an absorbing, atmospheric novella, told with subtle overlays of history, suspense, philosophical asides and humor.

SWEET PARADOX: Stories

By Eric E. Wallace

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ERIC E. WALLACE

SWEET PARADOX

stories



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Most of the characters in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, except where obvious, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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First Edition



also by Eric E. Wallace

UNDERTOW

HOAR FROST

STONERISE

EMPEROR'S REACH

THE IMPROVISER

MIND AFTER MIND

HOVER POINT

DEPTH PERCEPTION

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Crumbs

Spring, 1917. Now in its third lunatic year, The Great War, the one which surely will end all wars, continues to kill and maim.

Much of the world is focused on the incredible carnage, the insanity of the trenches.

But here in the Middle East, others are trying to mount a Great Arab Revolt, an attempt seeking to break the cruel hold of the Ottoman Empire.

Wadi Rum—the Valley of the Moon—far into the desert of southwest Jordan, seems a perfect place for Arab chieftains to meet to try to form a coalition against the Turks. The region is remote. Inhospitable to the uninitiated. Unlike in Aqaba or Amman, there are far more scorpions here than spies. And scorpions tell no tales.

There's a distinctive catalyst for this latest meeting. He's an unusual, almost-renegade British Army officer. Well-educated, an archeologist, an Arabist, a man who clearly loves the desert—more, seems to thrive in it like the Bedouin who live here—he's one Captain Thomas Edward Lawrence, determined to bring the tribes together. Determined to shape nations, perhaps to bring peace.

Here in austere-beautiful Wadi Rum, *El Aurens* dresses like an Arab, speaks Arabic fluently, shows the Bedouin aptitude for riding obstinate camels, walking long distances, living without sleep, facing extreme temperature swings, dealing with the sand-flinging winds with equanimity.

Lawrence has been in Wadi Rum before, calling it 'irresistible, vast, echoing and God-like.' It is a place of raw beauty: the wide, flat desert floor. Canyons, hills, peaks and domes, some a thousand feet high. Dramatic pillars, towers and ramparts of sandstone and granite, many of them the color of dried blood.

In the distance rise the peaks of *Jabal Um Ad Dami*, *Jabel Rum* and *Jabal al-Mazmar*. And here and there, by Allah's grace, bubble small springs, hidden except to those who properly seek. Springs are rare, but the Bedouin—and their camels—know how to find them. You must. Else you die of thirst, felled, gasping, by the sun's savagery. If you've not already died from a scorpion sting. Or been cooked alive, the death of a thousand burns.

This special gathering of chieftains is at a camp near the spring of *Ain Shalaleeh*—'five square feet of paradise,' Lawrence calls it—but as the women, murmuring, bake flatbread and *ruqaq* over an open flame and prepare the evening feast in a fire pit, the British officer turns his back on the soft green ferns and the miraculous trickle, talks with the sheiks of overcoming oppression, of self-rule, of the need for at least temporary unity.

El Aurens speaks mainly with the *Nadji* dialect. His words are powerful, his language convincing, his idioms accurate. For the moment, he is one of them, a nomad, a desert-dweller. A chieftain.

They sit, cross-legged—some on blankets, most on the sand—and talk, gesture, chew khat, spit. Near them stand the camels, also spitting, occasionally hissing, honking and gargling.

“One of the least happy animals on earth, I should think,” Lawrence observes.

“Not at all,” a scar-faced sheik says, smiling. “Allah placed these beasts here to serve. You hear them singing in praise.”

“*Fi alwaqie*,” Lawrence notes drily. “Indeed.”

A thousand meters away, high on a rocky promontory, a Syrian mercenary known only as Alqatil, The Assassin, scrambles to find a good firing position before the sun sets. A fiendish sandstorm held him up, else he would have arrived earlier, finished.

He carries only his beloved Ottoman Mauser, a bag of water and a pouch of hashish, which he will enjoy smoking after he has completed his task, after he has glided away from Wadi Rum, *Praise Allah*.

What does Alqatil, hired in Damascus, briefed in Istanbul, know of his target? A man people are beginning to call him ‘Lawrence of Arabia.’ An interfering English dog, a spy. A few admire him. Some dislike him. Many distrust him.

Others want him dead. And will pay handsomely for that.

Alqatil peers down from behind an outcropping. The intelligence was correct. This is no ordinary meeting.

Even without using the scope he’s carefully cleaning, he can identify the man he will kill. The photograph was crumpled, but Lawrence is easy to recognize, tall among others, his skin browning but whiter than the rest, his

manner arrogant, any deference clearly studied, his Bedouin clothing worn more with Western insouciance than from ageless custom. Forever a *kafir*, an infidel.

There is movement below. The group is rising. Alqatil curses quietly. He has arrived just as the meeting is stopping and Arab hospitality is taking over. It is feasting time. He is not quite ready, and he scowls as he watches the men move under a long, woven goat hair awning. He can see some of them as they sit, but the fabric hides all of Lawrence.

The Assassin shakes his head. It may be almost dark before *El Aurens* comes out into the clear again. The shot will need to be made under tricky light. But Alqatil has killed at sunset before, at dusk, twice even by moonlight, *Praise Allah*. His eyes are keen, the optics profoundly German and therefore perfect. He spits. One shot is all he will get, but one is all he ever needs.

He settles in to watch.

In the feasting area under the awning, women silently approach, set out flickering candles on small rock pedestals, place bowls of precious rose-scented water on low, goatskin-topped tables and silently slip away.

Soon they bring the meal. Lingering odors of tallow, camel sweat and goat dung are pushed aside by many more pleasant aromas.

Sitting cross-legged on cushions, rolls of cloth and small carpets, the men feast on roast goat and onions, boiled rice, yoghurt, dates, white cheese, dried okra flavored

with thyme and mallow, ash-coated flatbread. Grease glistens on their hands.

They drink hot sweet tea and cardamon coffee. They relish fig-and-honey tarts, the *ruqaq* pastry flaky and rich.

Outside, music begins: *gerbeh* bagpipes, drum and flute. In one long line, twenty Bedouin men in white robes, red sashes and checkered headcloths slowly dance across the sand, linked closely together with arms tightly around shoulders. Their leader wields a long, curved *saif*, his free hand waving the sword like a silver baton.

Above them, the full moon has begun to rise, ghostly in the pale sky. The sun has not yet set, but it is dropping quickly. The line undulates. The dancers dip, rise, dip again, gracefully grapevining in wide, looping semi-circles.

Alqatil watches from his high vantage point, allowing himself to appreciate the fluid symmetry. He slows his breathing, cleansing himself of any impatience. The moment surely is near, *Praise Allah*.

He has taken care of the smallest details. He chambers a round, quietly moves the bolt forward. One bullet. If he needs a second, it won't be for the Englishman. It will be for...

His nostrils flare. His smile is dark, dutiful. *Mashiyat Allah*, Allah's will.

Lawrence, still seated in the semi-tent, looks at the dancers with quiet approval. Almost unconsciously, he lets his left hand move above the nearest candle, holds

the palm unflinchingly over the guttering flame. His neighbors grunt. Lawrence grins thinly, pushes his hand closer. If he feels pain, it goes inward, serving some private need.

The music and dancing end.

Lawrence finishes his tart, licks honeyed fig from a finger, burps ceremoniously. He rises effortlessly, steps out from under the awning, stretches. He moves away from the others and stands near the camels. Motionless, he gazes up at the faint moon, the namesake of this beautiful valley. The air is hazy, lightly tinted with red.

The Assassin nods, identifies the tall, sunburned white man, robed like a sheik in his black and white kaftan, a *jambiya* dagger at his belt. *El Aurens* is clearly not an Arab, yet he holds a certain bearing. He is almost a figure to admire.

Yakfil Enough! Alqatil verifies the wind direction, adjusts the scope, draws a breath, frames Lawrence's head, softly haloed in the dusky light. The English infidel slowly bows downward, as if in prayer. Does he somehow know his fate?

The sun is sliding behind the high summit above the spring, but a thin shaft of angry orange finds a notch in the rocks, streaks over the valley and blesses the scope's front lens with sudden radiance. With a stab of dying gold.

Alqatil blinks as he squeezes the trigger.

In the same instant, Lawrence bends further to flick pastry crumbs from his robe.

Crumbs

At the sharp sound, the Arabs below cringe, duck, scatter.

A camel slowly collapses, its bones settling with a wheeze, dark blood vanishing quickly into the greedy sand.

Lawrence, erect and unhurrying, brushing away yet another tiny scrap of pastry, steps almost disdainfully back under the awning.

Moments later, a second report reverberates from a distant crag.

From the biggest detail to the tiniest, Allah's will decides all things.

About the Author

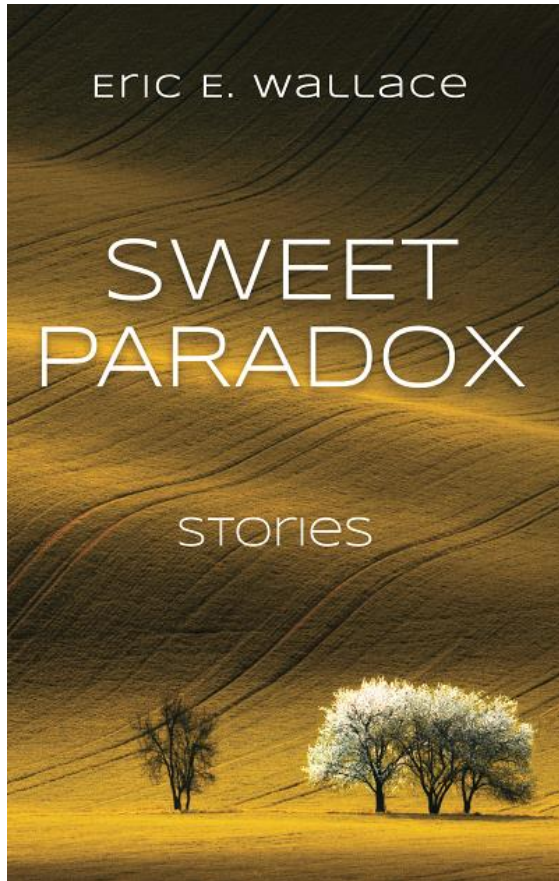
Eric E. Wallace writes fiction, poetry, plays and humor.

His work has been published in many literary journals and periodicals, including *Alaska Magazine*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The First Line*, *Rosebud* and *Writer's Digest*, in more than a dozen print anthologies and online at *Writers Weekly*, *Idaho Magazine*, *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal* and elsewhere.

Sweet Paradox is Eric's ninth book. His previous books, all published by BookLocker, are *Undertow*, a collection of eighteen of his short stories; *Hoar Frost*, containing seven stories; *Stonerise*, with nine stories; and his five novels—*Emperor's Reach*, *The Improviser*, *Mind After Mind*, *Hover Point* and *Depth Perception*.

Eric was born in Glasgow, Scotland and educated there, in Victoria, B.C., Canada and in Northern California. For over 35 years he was a public and commercial television and radio broadcaster (producer/writer/director and air talent), working primarily in Florida and Alaska. He now lives in Eagle, Idaho.

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