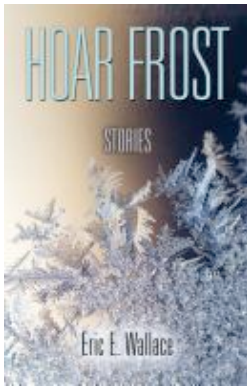


HOAR FROST



STORIES

Eric E. Wallace



HOAR FROST, by award-winning fiction writer Eric E. Wallace (*UNDERTOW*), is an anthology of seven diverse literary short stories touching on important themes—mortality, grief, faith, memory, and love—and filled with unusual juxtapositions and remarkable characters. The settings range from Alaska to Iowa, from South Carolina to British Columbia, from Idaho to the Galapagos Islands. Eric Wallace's distinctive voice is sometimes lyrical, sometimes ironic, sometimes quietly-humorous. And always engaging.

HOAR FROST

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*Sooner or later,
doubt comes to each of us.
Doubt can paralyze us—sometimes for keeps.
Or doubt can make us stop and reflect.
Eventually, it might even propel us
in amazing new directions.
If we're lucky.*

The trail passed through a windbreak of shrubs and dead grasses, and Barr stopped, stamping his feet. Snow had blown into the branches, forming odd little clumps, shapes which looked to him like elephants, ice cream cones, a bearded Moses. One crisp, glittering limb reminded Barr of this morning's hoar frost, which he'd observed but knew he'd not fully appreciated.

The remembered beauty of those ice crystals hit him now. He was struck by the intensity of the cold needed to form them. He shivered.

The shiver turned into a tremble. When he closed his eyes, he saw a malicious frost growing inside his heart, limning blood red with icy white. Sharp pinnacles of isolation, shining splinters of separation, crystalline tendrils of doubt were forming frozen barriers, a chain mail of ice.

Barr felt tears freezing on his cheeks. His throat, fiercely-dry, constricted.

Conviction. Connectedness. Focus. He needed all of them. But they were sliding away from him, as a mountain climber, his ropes unravelling strand by strand, slides into a crevasse.

And Barr felt his faith surely was sliding with them.

*from "Hoar Frost", one of the seven absorbing stories in this new
anthology by award-winning writer Eric E. Wallace*

HOAR FROST

Stories

Eric E. Wallace

2015

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Anchorage, Alaska – Eagle, Idaho

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houses sat where the '64 quake had collapsed an entire neighborhood. But people disregarded the geotechnical reports, built again there too. *How many things we do in blind faith.*

A sermon on earthquakes and human foibles began asserting itself. Barr shrugged it away. His own life felt far too many tremors.

What, no blind faith, Barr? He grimaced. How about plain, ordinary faith?

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strand, slides into a crevasse. And Barr felt his faith surely was sliding with them.

His cell phone rang.

"Shit. Not now." But he fumbled for it. Removed a glove, undid a coat button, probed inside his vest. "This better be God himself."

The display showed it was the church office. Not quite the higher echelon.

"Yes, Cheryl?" Two articulated words not hiding his displeasure.

"An emergency. I'm patching through APD. Just a sec."

Barr's heart raced. *Janice? Olivia?*

It was Bill Huffman, a police sergeant who attended the church.

"Look, Pastor. Got a jumper on the roof of the Westward. He won't talk to a cop, so I thought of you."

"I don't think I'm ..."

"Worth a shot, yes? How quickly can you get here?"

"I'm on the coastal trail, but not too far from my car. Maybe 15 minutes."

"Drive right to the front entrance, I'll be waiting."

How do you sprint on a snowy path? Wearing city clothes? When you're out of shape to begin with? Barr forced his body to do the impossible. As he puffed along, his mind tried to recall what little seminary training he'd had about dealing with suicidal people. Suicide was a sub-unit of a sub-unit of personal counseling. *"Don't clobber them with God"* was all he could remember, and then he realized that was his own smart-ass comment scribbled in the margin.

He gasped all the way to his car, put the wipers and defroster on high and drove off, cursing the one-way streets which forced him to make a loop and deal with too many red lights. *What's the rush? You can't possibly help.*

Simultaneously frozen and sweating, heart galloping, he careened up to the police blockade at the hotel entrance, jumped out, yelled his name. Huffman promptly emerged, shook Barr's hand, led the way to an elevator.

"He's on the old outdoor rooftop. Supposed to be closed, no public access. We think maybe he had maintenance keys."

"What's his name?"

"Tom, Tim, Kim, something. Late 20's, early 30's."

"You know anything else?"

"Only that he was spotted out there 'bout an hour ago. Guess he's in no big hurry." Huffman looked bored. Barr hoped it was merely the neutral face of officialdom.

The elevator grumbled past the floor where Barr had spent a slow and sensual afternoon with Olivia's predecessor. *What the hell do I say to Tom, Tim? 'Why jump when you can have fun in 1216?'* He kicked at himself. *Once a jerk, always a jerk.*

Huffman was studying him. "We gotta psychologist on staff for this sorta stuff, but she's in Fairbanks today. I've heard you talk, Pastor. I vouched for you. Don't let us down."

"And don't let your jumper down, huh?"

Huffman grimaced. "Yeh, especially not him." The elevator door dinged and opened.

A female officer nodded at Barr, spoke to Huffman. "Got some info, Sarge. Name's Timothy Cooper. Hotel maintenance staff. Lives in Muldoon. No one answers the phone number in his file. That's it."

Huffman led Barr through the clutter of the closed restaurant areas, through the small phalanx of APD officers and out onto the flat roof. The snow cover was light. Somehow the hotel kept the snow load down. *Wonder where they dump it all?* The thin air sparkled with frost.

They crossed the unused patio and stopped at a safety railing. Huffman pointed. Steam rose from a metallic garden of pipes and vents. Beyond them, a small, thin man in brown overalls stood near the edge of the roof, peering out. Down. He turned to watch Barr and the policeman. His folded arms were pressed against his chest, and his entire body shook. Barr felt even colder.

"Timothy. Tim," called Huffman. "This is Pastor Windom. The one I told you about. A really good guy. Can he come out there and talk to you?"

The man moved back a step and looked over the edge. Barr's knees quivered. His stomach lurched. He swallowed hard. How far up was he? Two hundred feet? More?

The man turned back to them but said nothing.

"Climb over the guardrail," Huffman told Barr, "but don't go any further."

Barr, his heart thudding, struggled over the metal railing. He felt like an inept recruit in basic training. But as he slid down then steadied on the other side, tightly clutching a post, he surprised himself by speaking.

"Tim. My name's Barry." His white breathstream danced in the waning sunlight. "I'm just a two-bit minister. But I'm good at listening. You want to talk, I'll listen." His toes felt frostbitten. The strong smell of fried onions belched from a vent. He began to regret his big lunch.

Tim seemed to think about it. He gave a half-nod. "OK. But not too close." The voice was surprisingly deep, but hoarse.

"Good luck," Huffman whispered. "Don't get too near the edge."

Are you kidding? Barr slowly shuffled out onto the open roof. Breathed deeply. Kept his eyes on Tim, who was standing only three feet from oblivion.

Tim grunted. "You bring God with you?"

"I'd like to think he's around somewhere."

"God ain't been doin' me no favors." A burst of loud music echoed up the canyon between the hotel and the buildings on Third Avenue.

Barr stopped. "You want to move a little closer to me, Tim? I'm afraid of heights."

Tim coughed a laugh. "That's a good one." He turned and looked over the tiny parapet, scuffed snow. Barr's insides flipped.

"OK, OK. I'll keep coming." Barr edged forward, stopped again. "Meet me halfway?"

"Nah." Tim's face was depression-era gaunt. Weathered. A yellow crust of mucous was frozen under his nose. "You gonna tell me why I shouldn't jump?"

Barr managed another step. "No."

That earned a double take. "Why the fuck you here?"

Barr stopped again. Four feet to Tim. Seven feet to...

"I'm your hostage negotiator," he answered. *Where'd that come from?*

Tim looked puzzled. "What hostage?" He shivered.

Make something up, Barr, you idiot. "Well, you're kinda holding your life hostage, aren't you?"

Tim frowned. "You said you'd listen."

"I will. I am."

On impulse, Barr sat down, awkwardly crossing his legs. He felt a welcome moment of warmth on his limbs before the roof's ice and snow started gnawing at him. He blew air out noisily and looked up at Tim.

Startled, Tim sat down also. Barr noticed that he first checked to see where the edge was. *A good sign?*

"Fucking cold." Tim offered that to no one in particular. He wasn't wearing gloves. Barr off took his own pair and tossed them to Tim with surprising accuracy. Tim grabbed them, put them on, slowly flexed his fingers. *Another good sign? Shit, quit stalling.*

"So tell me why God's not been doing you any favors."

Tim talked. Barr kept silent. It was a long tale of woes, the kind of troubles which individually don't do anyone in but when piled high on each other seem

impossible to stand up to. Debts of all kinds, a failing relationship, problems with his GED test, a broken sewer pipe which the trailer court wouldn't fix, a crummy job, a recent DUI, and too much winter, this year extra long and mean.

Tim tried to pull his overall bib up to his throat. "I was born in fuckin' freezin' Wasilla, but some years winter kinda gets to you, y'know?"

Barr nodded. *Just don't ask me to solve anything. Me of all people.* His uncovered hands were two rigid popsicles. His hips were locked in a freezer. His knee joints screamed. But he kept quiet. Listened.

Tim sniffed and spat. "And today? Everything really went to shit today. Toilet freezes. Carmen says she wants to fuckin' move out. Bus is late. I lose my wallet. Boss chews me royally. I think I'm peeing blood. So they send me up to fix some stupid cable TV problem, and I have the keys to the roof. And I think why not?" He looked toward the edge. "I was a pretty good diver at Lake Lucille—" He turned back to Barr. "Hell, I'd score a perfect 10." His laugh was filled with phlegm.

A low fighter jet roared down towards Elmendorf. They both flinched. *Good thing we're not standing.* Barr thought of the bell tower in *Vertigo*, and a startled Kim Novak falling to her death.

Tim looked exhausted. "Got a cigarette?"

Barr shook his head. *Christ, I'd like one myself.*

"Shit." Tim stared at nothing for a moment, looked back at Barr. "Well?"

"Does talking about it help?"

Tim thought. "Guess so. Yeah, some."

They sat in silence. In the distance, the jet's afterburners roiled.

"Well," said Tim again. "What should I do?"

Barr shrugged, thought. He surprised himself. "I don't have any answers."

Tim blinked. "Well, what would you do? If it was you?"

"Find someone to listen, I guess. Someone trained."

Tim thought about it. "No one pays me no mind."

"Doesn't have to be that way, Tim."

"Huh." Tim looked past Barr. "They gonna throw me in jail?"

"I don't think so. They'll maybe listen some more. Wanna go get warm?"

"I dunno. Maybe." Tim shivered. "Guess so."

They struggled to their feet. Tim was still very close to the edge. The setting sun flared yellow behind him. Barr's heart catapulted. *C'mon*. He held out a frozen paw. *Please*. Tim hesitated, puzzling. Barr forced himself to keep the arm extended. *But don't pull me over*.

Tim shambled forward and took Barr's hand. A tentative sort of grip, but it became a half-handshake. They turned, trekked to the guardrail. Barr was happy to see the cops were backing off.

Tim put a hand on the rail, stopped. ""Thanks for not droppin' God on me." He climbed over.

"Couldn't drag him up here," Barr panted, wrestling himself over. He felt like a beaching walrus. "God's afraid of heights too."

The lobby was hot and crowded. It smelled of chili, lemon oil. Lightheaded, Barr dropped into a chair. The cops and EMTs brought lukewarm coffee and scratchy blankets. Sergeant Huffman spoke kindly to Tim. He said that they needed to check him into A.P.I. for at least a day or so.

Tim stared morosely into his coffee. "Buncha shrinks?"

"A good thing," Barr assured him. "People who'll listen. And I'll come visit you tomorrow morning. I promise."

Barr asked Huffman to make sure a physician checked on the blood in Tim's urine. He also asked the cops for a favor—to lean hard on a certain trailer park landlord about broken sewer pipes—and Tim grinned for the first time.

"Thanks, Pastor." He had a pretty decent smile.

Barr watched the ambulance leave, a white whirlwind spinning from its roof. Huffman walked him over to his car. There was a ticket on the windshield. Sergeant Huffman grabbed it.

"In-fucking-credible," he muttered, stuffing the ticket into his jacket. Coffee creamer flecked his mustache. "Pardon the language. We'll take care of this."

"Thanks. It hasn't been my day either." Barr tugged at the car door. It opened reluctantly.

Huffman took off a glove. "What did you say to him?"

"Mostly I listened. Guess that's what he needed. I was going purely on instinct."

"Well, your instinct was right on." He shook Barr's hand. "I envy you, Pastor."

"Oh?"

"Your faith. I'll bet your great instincts come from a very strong faith."

Barr gave him a thin smile. "Someday we might debate that, Sergeant. Or maybe I'll turn it into a sermon." Barr got into his car, now an ice chest. The engine turned over with just the tiniest protest. *Small favors.*

His supposed day off was winding down rapidly. He drove aimlessly for a few minutes before pulling into a parking place on Sixth. He turned the wimpy defroster to high. The persistent rooftop images continued to rattle him. He thought about Tim, overwhelmed, just needing a listener. *Thank God my instincts were right.*

But did God have anything to do with it? If he did, why did he put Tim up there in the first place?

Barr thought about Norman, ready to take his own huge leap. He vowed that tomorrow early he'd call Norman, give him the backing he deserved. *So the board ships me back to the Lower 48? Janice would like that.*

Janice. Barr decided to take her out to dinner. She could talk all she wanted with no interruptions. He called her cell. It went right to voice mail. He couldn't think how to word a decent message. He hung up. He tried her office number. Voice mail.

The Toyota heater had begun its pretense at warmth. Barr drove to the Muni building where Janice worked. A small Eskimo woman in a red kuspuk smiled tiredly at him and said Janice had gone home early.

"She called a taxi." The woman was missing a front tooth.

Barr drove south in sluggish traffic. He was vaguely aware of the alpenglow coloring the Chugach mountains. But he was thinking again about being out on the hotel roof. The stuff of nightmares likely to come.

How easy it would have been to have said the wrong thing. One stupid little wisecrack. One dumb hint of condescension. One bit of pompous surety. One piece of banal advice. A last misplaced straw for an overstressed guy. Tim easily could have jumped. And Barr would have seen it. He would have watched Tim leap, vanish. Barr shuddered. He imagined himself also going over, the frigid rush to eternity. Down below, making the ultimate snow angel.

He was angry at Tim for not coping. Angry at Cheryl for interrupting his walk. Angry at Huffman for asking him to help. Angry at himself for going to the roof. Angry at Janice for not being there to talk to about it all. And he was angry for getting angry. He fought hyperventilation.

In front of him, a bulky pickup changed lanes and cut it too close. A huge shower of slush thumped onto the Toyota's hood. Barr hit the horn and let it wail.

No Janice at home. But there was a terse note. She had gone to spend a few days with a friend. Back

Thursday or Friday. *Friend? What friend?* Barr had to laugh at the spurt of unfamiliar jealousy.

Leftover pasta, tasteless. Television drama, insipid. Fretting about next Sunday's service, annoying. Prepping for tomorrow's committee meetings, boring. Going back and back again to that rooftop, frightening.

His calendar program seized up, and as he restarted the laptop he found himself wondering if his marriage could be rebooted. *Yes, reboot.* But was that possible? A bigger question, he thought, was that of rebooting his faith. How to do either escaped him.

He sank into his chair in the den and picked up his family bible. Readings were a nightly ritual. *Faith through repetition.* He liked the book's familiar heft, the buttery feel of the worn leather cover, the faint, strangely-reassuring must of old paper.

Recently he'd been studying the letters of St. Paul, trying to put himself into a far different mind in far different times, hunting for new understanding, hoping to re-engage. With little interest, he let the bible fall open. Guided by its fat gold silk bookmark, it flopped into First Corinthians.

Barr forced himself to focus. One line leapt at him. "To remind you of my ways, I have sent you Timothy."

The hotel roof came rushing back. Tim stood like a scarecrow, arms out in mock crucifixion, overalls billowing. The sun glowered, the wind surged. Tim staggered backwards, waving, floundering, and flabbergasted over the edge, flailing. Barr's heart pounded. *My turn next.*

Hoar Frost

The bible had fallen into his lap. Barr closed it, put in on the table. He decided to clear his head with a short walk before bed. The outdoor thermometer showed 15 degrees. He went to the coat closet and jammed on layer upon layer. *Makes for softer landings.*

He went outside. The cold sniffed at him, quickly attacked. His cheeks stung. His ears tingled unpleasantly. He walked partway down the driveway, stopped, looked up. Very few clouds. Above them a million stars rejoiced.

If he fell off the earth how long he would fall—*fly?*—before reaching a star? Quite a trip. *Something worth jumping for.*

At the bottom of the driveway he shone his flashlight on the dark fence, on desolate shrubs. He passed the beam over silent trees and overhead wires. He wondered if even now hoar frost was forming on everything, furtive little crystals joining hands, intertwining facets in the dark, sticking together like tongues glued to ice cubes.

In the morning, he thought, the effect might be stunning, touching the heart. *That artist again. Or just plain physics?*

A passage from Exodus tapped at his mind. What was it? A connection between hoar frost and...

Manna. Moses told his followers that God would provide life-saving manna. Moses said it would look like hoar frost. *Well, whoopeddoo, God. Are you sending me manna? What are you trying to tell me?*

His fingers were numb. His nose twitched at the smell of burning cedar. Cold air poured into his boots.

His toes complained, rumbled of mutiny. As he turned to walk back, he gazed at the sky beyond his house.

Ahh.

The northern lights. Teasing him with evershifting swirls. Blurred greens, shimmering blues, flowing wisps of dark red. Iridescent curtains flickering across the heavens, ghost writing rising from the invisible, undulating, disappearing. Here a trace, there a hint, now you see it, now you don't. *Like faith.*

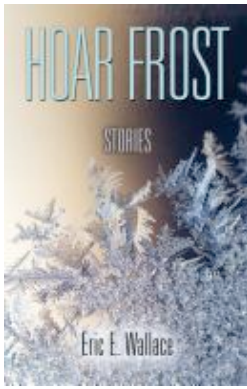
Barr grew dizzy, lowered his head, massaged the back of his neck. He breathed out, pulled his scarf tighter, plodded back up to the house.

A short time later he climbed into bed, lay still, staring at nothing. He felt guilt about the state of his marriage. Unexpected relief about Olivia. He hoped he could right things with Norman. Trusted Tim would survive. *No more roofs.*

Forgetting his bedtime prayer, he turned out the light.

He fell asleep thinking of the aurora, of the frigid starry night, thinking of the intense cold quietly forming ice lace, exquisite, serene, on the trees, the bushes, the wires, the fence posts.

He dreamed of hoar frost, impassive, beautiful, slowly settling deep inside him, kaleidoscoping, blossoming, sculpting white fern crystals on the thin edges of his soul.



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