

Still Waters

By Ziad Al-Hasso. Published September 2026

Part One – Sea Fever

He had no real idea where he was going, but he would be damned if he was going to turn back now.

The sky ahead was leaden and grey with thickening clouds. An inch above the distant horizon he could see the dark threatening band of a storm.

Every instinct in him was urging him to turn about, to spin his wheel and put this tempest behind him.

He would not lack for power, for the winds were picking up already and getting stronger by the minute. Twice now he had to reef his mainsail to adjust for the blustery conditions. Soon, he would not be able to rely on the winds at all, for it would drive him over. And he was not ready for that moment yet.

The motor would take him a bit further, but eventually even that would fail him. The wonders of modern engineering would be no match for the growing force of the swell around him.

The wind caught the top of a wave, and a sudden spray drenched his face. He grinned through the salt water. Unbidden, words arose from his memory inside him.

“I must go down to the seas again,” he suddenly said aloud.

The sound of his own voice surprised him. It had been a long time since he had heard anything but the crash of the bow on the waves, and the wind whistling through the whipping sail above.

“For the call of the running tide...”

He noted how croaky he sounded; his throat was dry. He swallowed spit and continued, lower but firmer to himself.

“...is a wild call...”

The poem had come from nowhere. He had loved it when he first heard it years ago and it had always stuck with him. He was not the sort to quote poetry often, but he had kept a special place in his heart for this one.

Perhaps that poem was the first realisation of the need that had brought him to this moment?

“...and a clear call...”

He had even been tempted to name his boat after it, but he shied away at the last instant. He had seen too many other vessels and seaside cottages bearing the same name. Besides, events had led him to a new name.

His wife, no – his ex-wife – never really understood it. Why name such a sleek yacht after something that seemed so opposite to its being? No sailor wanted to be calmed, even those with a motor. Chugging across a dead sea bore no joy. It tugged at the very reason of sailing that even she could appreciate.

Why purport to enjoy the freedom of the sea, and yet do it on a vessel that seemed named to constrict it?

It was one of his many inconsistencies that she had found fault with. And, like with the others, she did not really care in the end. If he wanted to have a stupid name on his stupid boat, that was his business. And that was it. She was gone.

His smile widened. His voice rose to a defiant shout

“...that can NEVER BE DENIED!”

He was quiet then for a while, content to hear the mad clinking from the lines against the mast and the rhythmic slapping of the hull as it pitched down on wave after wave.

It was freedom really. It was always about freedom.

Out here on the high seas he could escape. Of course, there were laws of the sea and rules he would need to adhere to just to survive, but they were his rules. The moment he crossed that invisible line two hundred miles away from the nearest coast, and left behind all the laws of government that came with it, he breathed easier.

The world was cruel, the sea crueller. If he chose to take himself into the deep blue and disappear into a storm, no-one would stop him. On land, he had found himself in some remote places, and there were always foolish ways to end one's life – but it rankled him to die on someone else's soil. Even after he was gone, there would be their laws ruling over what had happened to him.

Out here he was free. Free to live how he wanted, free to die if he did not respect the only laws he really cared about.

But he did not know which freedom he wanted yet.

He steered his yacht on.

Still Waters knifed towards the oncoming storm. A white teardrop falling down the darkening face of the sea.

Part Two – The Storm

The coffin was heavy as they lowered it into the ground. A sturdy construction for the young man within it.

Six pairs of hands and three stout straps meant it was never in danger of falling, but he was struck with a sudden fear that his grip would slip and his side would give way.

Bob would have laughed at that.

Of all the people in the world to lose, why did it have to be him?

The winds came first. They heralded the arrival of the storm with sudden gusts that seemed to blow up out of nowhere. These were not the winds that carried him along, that filled the billowing sail giving his dreams reality. These were storm winds, fierce squalls and gusts that blew in from every angle threatening to knock him off his feet.

And they brought the rain. A horizontal stinging rain that hit him with the force of a thousand pellets. It was a constant wall of sheeting wetness that thinned the distinction between being in the sea itself and being atop it. Water streamed off his face, forcing him to repeatedly wipe clear his eyes.

But the waves were the real fury of the storm. They filled the horizon, rolling out of the vastness of the sea, towards him and beyond. His presence meant nothing to them, he was a tiny prick of dust on their endless faces. And they grew in size. They became mountains and valleys, affording brief glimpses of false horizons when he rode to their peaks, and then filling his world with the magnitude of the sea when he raced down the other side.

He glanced behind him and amazingly glimpsed a stretch of calm sky far away where the dark fingers of the storm had yet to reach. That distant horizon was azure tinged with orange.

There was still time to escape, perhaps. To spin the wheel and run before the storm, hoping to somehow outpace the winds at his back. It would have been a fool's errand, but he could still try it.

Although there was no-one to witness it, he shook his head. Both hands firm on the wheel he grimly set the prow of *Still Waters* on his course. Not towards the centre of the storm. Nor away from it – but at an angle cutting across it.

Putting himself somewhere between the devil and the deep blue sea.

He was one of the quiet ones, he knew that. It was that quietness that first drew him to the phrase, and then the name that followed.

“Still waters run deep.”

It resonated with him. A calmness on the surface that hid a multitude of emotions beneath.

Another thing it hid was the pain.

He carried his hurt deep within him. So deep that no-one could see anything was wrong.

He noticed that if he stayed quiet, then after a while people stopped asking him questions. Was he coping? Was he okay? Had he heard from her?

He preferred it that way.

The waves towered above his head now. It was impossible to see past them to gauge where the next one was. But it did not matter, he knew there would always be another one coming in. They

were endless, repeatedly battering him again and again. There was no escaping the clutches of the storm now.

He was operating almost purely on instinct; there was no time for idle thoughts or memories of half-forgotten poems. Each wave that rose above his right was the immediate challenge that needed conquering. The only thing that mattered while it threatened his existence. He had to crest it before it broke or it turned him over. And as soon as it was passed it was forgotten, his attention on the next approaching giant.

He had strapped himself to the wheel. *Still Waters* and him had become one being against the storm. Either they both survived or neither did. Whatever happened he had to stop himself being swept overboard. Life jackets did not matter out here. There would be no rescue. No way to drag himself back on board if they were parted.

Why bother?

Even as he mechanically steered right into each wave, angling the tip of the yacht for a distant point on the crest, his arms straining against the force trying to turn him broadside, while his feet slipped on the deck, the question rose in his mind.

Why fight it? Just let go of the wheel. Let the sea decide. It would be so easy.

Wasn't this what he wanted? Wasn't this why he had come here?

He was alone. Truly alone. There would be no-one to judge him, or to laugh at his futile indecision. If he really wanted to end the pain it would be the simplest of obliterations. He could slip beneath the face of the storm and it would all be over.

Keeping going was sometimes such an effort. An effort that seemed to reward him only with more pain and the hollowness of loss.

He had already removed himself so far from the mundanity of life, drifting further and further away from what people laughably called reality. He was at the very edge out here. It would take one more step.

Just let go.

A wave crashed down on top of him, soaking him through. The waters were freezing cold. The shock of it washed away his thoughts and snapped him out of his reverie.

The human instinct to breathe, to survive, lashed out and took control. It cared nothing for his darkening thoughts or for the echoes of old pain. The body wanted only to survive and to gasp another lungful of air.

The next wave was already cresting up above him. Only two thoughts were permitted in his mind. Steer into it again or do nothing and die.

Bob looked at him and gave him that lazy half smile of his, full of love and joy.

"You've got this," he had said.

Hands, numb from the cold, gripped the wheel once more and he forced the tip of *Still Waters* to rise over the wave. Again and again and again. He battled and strained against them all.

As each wave crashed into him it asked a question.

“Are you sure?” the sea demanded. “How can you fight? How can you win? “

The waves slapped him with impunity, mocking his pathetic attempts at self-control. It was too large to be denied, too strong to be resisted. The eternity of the sea against his own weak mortality could only have one outcome.

But in the harsh coldness of the storm, something had lit a fire within him.

Fuck it.

He was not done yet. He was not ready to give up.

Fuck it all.

Time became measured in the heartbeat between the waves. Each trough and peak seemed like a lifetime, and in many ways it was. How long could he keep this up for? He was already soaked through, his arms burned from the effort. Pain lashed through his body from whatever battering he already taken and not even been aware of.

His decision made, he focused on the chaos of the storm around him. What did need to do to survive? But a fear spoke to him inside, had he left it too late? Was he going to die here anyway?

Had he come all this way just to decide and then have that choice taken away from him?

Bob's half-smile turned into a full bellied laugh, and his eyes were wet with joy as he shook his head at his father's idiocy.

A wolfish grin split his face. He bared his teeth to the storm and shouted back at the sea with a force he had not felt for years.

He was going to beat this.

Part Three – Bob

Still Waters was a modern yacht. Its shipwrights had engineered it to withstand heavy conditions that most owners would never encounter. It was undoubtedly the only reason he was still afloat.

But the yacht was a mess. The mainsail was torn; battens were broken and stitching pulled out. The guardrails were bent, something heavy must have broken free and knocked them as the sea swept it away. He did not even know what was missing yet.

Below the deck it was utter devastation. Cupboards had been smashed open from within, the force of the sea's impacts forcing contents outwards like cannon shot. A cupboard door swung crazily hanging on its last remaining hinge.

Water had leaked into the cabin from somewhere – a vent or a hatch must have sprung. It was not serious but would require time pumping it out, assuming the electrics and pumps still worked.

But it was not the yacht that was the problem. The ship had survived; it had endured where his weak body had not. He must have passed out at some point. He had woken groggily, his head pounding, still strapped to the wheelhouse chair.

Around him the sea gently undulated, its waves no longer challenging but caressing. They lapped against the side of the yacht with the tenderness of a lover's kiss.

The storm was gone. Above the sun beat down on him from a sky free of clouds.

He lifted his head and groaned.

A seagull, picking over some detritus at the front of the boat, flapped lazily away at the sound. He watched it dumbly until it flew out of his field of vision. He was too tired to even turn his head to see where it went.

It took him a long time to gather the strength to move. His body had been pushed past anything he had ever asked of it before. But a maddening thirst forced him to ignore the screaming aches and pains that flared within his being.

Even so, it had taken a long while for him to half crawl, half drag himself to the cabin where mercifully he found a bottle of water still where he had secured it. He lay against the frame of the doorway, sipping it and revelling in its moisture. He shut his eyes as exhaustion claimed him once more.

Lost in a daze memories began to run through his unguarded mind.

A woman, his woman, laughing and hoisting a child into the air. The child squealed with delight as the woman blew raspberries on to the child's exposed belly.

A man and his son stood awkwardly around a post box, tools in hands, neither seeming too sure of what to do with them.

An old couple, one small the other bent double, walking down the road supporting each other. He had watched them pass his windows many times until one day he did not see them anymore. Only the woman would walk by.

Moment after moment offered itself from his subconscious for him to examine. Things he had never even known that he had noticed. Things of seemingly no consequence, and yet now as he regarded them from his self-imposed purgatory, they became the most important memories of them all.

Life had seemed so meaningless after Bob's death. So empty, so mundane. Filled with a million tiny events that were so trivial and yet demanded so much attention at the same time.

To love is to let go.

That is what she said to him once, and those words crashed into his soul now.

He began to weep. He was not even aware that his eyes were open, staring blankly at the cabin while dreaming of the past. But now he sobbed, tears falling down his face while he wheezed and moaned aloud.

Love is sacrifice.

Had she said that? Had he said that to her? He could not remember who uttered those words or when. So much had been said after the loss of a child. His child.

Too much, and so he had shut it out.

But it had all been about sacrifice. A willing sacrifice. They had both given so much, to the life of their son, and now that he was gone, was there anything left of themselves?

The tears had stopped, simply because he had no more to give. But still he shuddered and moaned. But eventually, even that too stopped and he became silent. The sounds of the sea filled his being while he stared unseeing at the carnage before him.

What was left was everything their son would have wanted them to have.

He looked up and stared at the blue sky above.

"I miss you," he said.

But there was no answer.

Taking a deep breath, and ignoring the protests of pain from his body, he hauled himself to his feet. He took in the devastation inside the cabin and on the deck and sighed.

It would take a long time to clear this mess up and straighten everything out.

But strangely, he found that he was looking forward to it.

The End.