

Ch. 3 The Frayed Halyard

Dawn and Dudley sat on the doghouse near the mast – her hand toyed with his ear, his hair. Dougie balanced against Dawn holding the slack main halyard at the gooseneck – he smiled into the sun – he said, “Captain Ransom will be dancing to the masthead soon.” They shared a moment- they knew Ransom's predictable ritual and they smiled into the sun.

Charles went below, returning ten minutes later wearing a climbers "C" harness and his "Lirakis" chest harness; no longer holding the ice pack to his head. Thinned washed out blond hairs wetted to his scalp. "Absurd figure," Hussey thought, feeling old himself. Trying too hard at fifty, Ransom: ashen, tired, flaccid after his bang; but he was going up the mast. Kari said to Hussey's surprised look, “he – always goes up the mast before races”.

"You've gotta pace yourself, Charles – send Devin or Doug up." Hussey's words blew by Charles in the fresh breeze.

"Old Fool," he thought. Charles said, “Ritual maintenance – my father used to say, if you can't go up the mast you shouldn't be racing”. Hussey thought, “aging testosterone”. "Let me look at your bump", he said and then wished he hadn't – after the look he got from the owner.

Hussey wanted to shake this guy. Kari could only shake her head. "He always does." Charles was going up the mast.

Good cop that he once was, Frank tried to keep Charles talking. "Goin' to see your Maker, Charlie?", Hussey asked. “Please call me Charles”, Charles added quietly.

Crisscrossing Charles' chest - three inch wide yellow webbing; around his waist and veeing into his crotch; the "C" harness's green webbing with hi-tech Patagonian pile to protect the tender parts. A big grin broke across Hussey's face - Charles acting the fool was enough seed to get Hussey quoting Moby Dick. Dawn had joined Kari and Charles.

"Thar she blows...the white whale." Hussey laughed. He braced himself feeling like Starbuck - they give a good pour at club bars. He was at Pequat's helm. "Waves be breakin' across the deck; foam and water boiling around my boots. And out of the belly of the ship comes Ahab." Hussey had an audience. Dev walked back from the bow - they had finished setting the spinnaker lines. Dev, long time comic in his dad's company broadly joined in, "Too much canvas for these winds, Captain! We're sure to loose the mast." His dad, always the Irish raconteur had hold of the new story line. He pawed Ransom's shoulder bringing him into the play. "What do ye plan to do, Captain?"

Charles smiled, couldn't help reciting Ahab's famous line, "We'll sail her on or sail her under." Hussey grimaced, "Aye, Captain, but who'll challenge God. 'Tis mad to be hauled up the mast in this maelstrom." Charles had endured their play this long but he clearly itched to get started up the mast.

In a flat tone he said, "So, I'll go up now - first gun in an hour."

Hussey powered back the throttle, Dev loosened the main halyard cam clutch and walked up to Dougie - walked forward to the mast and took the halyard from Dougie.

Racing yachts often sent crew aloft. Several boats around them had kids up in the spreaders. But usually small young bowman. Sometimes just to horse around. Sometimes just pre-race posturing; the boat seemed racier, more professional with a kid up in the cross-trees. But a filled-out adult was hard work for the hoisters and the hoisted. The mast was 60 feet. Dawn or Dev would have liked to go. "So boring," Devin whispered to Dawn, more an expression of his feeling upstaged by an owner; for missing what should have been his chance

for local recognition. Hussey asked Charles, "Why bother? You could put it off 'till Newport." Kari didn't say anything - she knew they were all nuts.

Dev started to attach the halyard. Dougie stopped him saying, "Don't use the shackle, pull it thru the harness ring and tie a bowline. Which Devin did. He looked appreciatively and nodded. "Makes sense – not to trust the shackle."

And they made-up Charles to the halyard without using the shackle. The halyard ran from Charles, six stories up to the mast head. Then it ran down inside the mast to exit from a hole as high as you could jump above the cabin top. Charles looked at Frank and nodded, "no" to Dudley at the mast, who had positioned himself to jump the halyard.

Hussey looked at Doug at the clutch with the halyard around a winch. "Being the heaviest, I'll jump the halyard," Hussey said and walked to the mast. Dudley turned away.

Kari had taken the helm. Hussey stood arms up to jump the halyard, his weight doing most of the work. Out of this mast hole, the halyard ran to the base of the mast and then back towards the cockpit to a winch and Dougie. The winch gave you the power to raise and lower the halyard. Just in front of the winch was a cam clutch to stop the halyard when not adjusting it. Dawn not Dev now manned the cam clutch; it could stop his fall if the line fell off the winch. Kari at the helm tailed the line away from the large winch which Dougie would turn.

Standing at the mast, Hussey put his two hundred pounds onto the halyard pulling it away from the mast – Archimedes was always useful on sailboats. With this force Dougie easily cranked the winch and Charles rose up the mast. Slowly rising past the first spreader,

Charles sprayed silicon lightly into the the main track up the back of the mast. Past the second spreader he signaled. They stopped hauling. He kicked off into the blue sky and swung around to the

front of the mast. Here, at about thirty feet, spinnaker pole lines - the topping lift - ran into the front of the mast. There was a pulley wheel to lubricate.

The deck rocked a bit in the wind and chop. As Hussey jumped the halyard he looked up the mast and watched as the mast head whip ten feet to port - then to starboard. The higher Charles went, the greater the distance he swung. He was now on the thin section just above the top of the jib. The jib on a fractional rig didn't go to the top of the mast. Hussey wondered why IOR handicapped boats like Moveable Feast had weird masts. He answered himself – only identical boats were really “fair”.

MF beat the measurement rules with the thin extruded section of the mast – which was almost unstayed. When Ransom swung out it bent like a fishing pole. Again Hussey hung with both hands on the line just where it exited from the mast.

The line was faulty. His fingers wrapped around a break in the blue sheathing exposing the thin fibers at the core of the halyard. "Oh, shit."

He didn't pause. He had to get his hands on good line past the break... No reason to yell. Would just make the crew miss a heartbeat. He told Doug to grind. Charles sprayed the main pulley-sheave and kicked off to swing to the back of the mast. He grabbed onto the backstay near the whipping masthead. "Thinks he's a fucking bird..." a silent scream - hanging out on the backstay; the relative safety of the thin mast section five feet away. The damaged fiber core stretched slowly. "Bang!" It parted. Hussey had no choice. He grabbed what line he could as it parted and jammed his gloved hands into the mast rope hole. What he had been able to grab left a foot of frayed blue sheathing and white line below his fists.

"Doug! Devin!" Hussey ordered. Doug and everyone else saw and understood what had happened. "Loosen the other main halyard." Ransom had felt in his stomach the small drop, heard the bang and he too knew what had happened. A bird, he was hanging by the halyard to

his harness and by his left hand from the backstay. Sixty feet aloft. He saw an impossible long ride down a thin stainless steel wire.

Hussey spoke evenly, "Kari! Yell to him to swing back to the mast."

She didn't have a chance to. Ransom wasn't frozen dumb and his strength was almost spent. Necks bent, mouths open - they watched as he let go. In those few moments, Devin had the other main halyard in hand. He snaked it back and forth for Ransom to grab. The mast was swinging. Port, starboard. The section Charles had hold of was no thicker than his arm. A twenty foot drop to the top spreader cross-tree. American Cup crew would shimmy down but Ransom's reserves were long since spent. They didn't have to wait long. Ransom took notice. Slow small movements. He had the second halyard. Doubled it up and tied himself on.

Hussey could relax his hands. One fist came out of the mast hole bloody. A quick bowline on the bitter frayed end made a secure loop. Dougie tied a spinnaker line to that. They lowered his dad to the cabin roof.