

Story and photos by [REDACTED]

Drawer Full of Memories

GOING THROUGH A STEPFATHER'S DESK REVEALS A MAN'S PASSION FOR PURSUING BIG FISH AND THE LOVE HE HAD FOR HIS FAMILY AND FRIENDS



The remnants
of a fishing life.

He had giant hands. Fingers the circumference of quarters. Scarred, scratched, calloused and rough. Shaking his hand was like shaking a catcher's mitt. But somehow he could tie intricate fishing knots. He could fix damn near anything, and whether it flew, floated or rolled, he could drive it.

He opened an autobody shop at age 16 and stayed in business until he passed away last November at 78. He built tow trucks and dump trucks. He dabbled in real estate and restaurants. He served for decades as a volunteer firefighter. And he fished harder than anyone I knew growing up. For 35 years, he lived with my mom. Though they never officially married, I called him my stepdad.

The stepparent thing can be a roll of the dice. I lucked out. His name was Oliver Helmrich, but everyone called him Corky, a nickname that stuck to him as a young boy. He was a hardworking,

simple guy, but by no means a simpleton. He always wore the same outfit: a blue polo shirt with a chest pocket for his glasses or phone, khaki shorts and boat shoes that stretched out over the sides of the soles. He never wore socks, unless the ground was frozen.

In his prime, he was powerful, like the trucks he built. I once saw him throw a car transmission over his shoulder and walk across the

First Light

yard next to his shop without so much as a grimace. He had a soft side, too. He was always taking in outcasts and strays. He'd employ them, lend them money and try to lead them down a path toward success. When the world gave up on these souls, Corky would give them shelter. I can't count how many people I've bumped into who have told me a story about a time Corky helped them out, no strings attached. I'm one of them.

When he passed, I drove my truck from my home in Florida to Connecticut to help my mom. It was a dark time, and she needed a sympathetic ear and a strong back. My biggest task was organizing his mountain of tackle, beneath which sat his rolltop desk. Stuck in a corner of the den, next to a wood stove, his desk hardly ever saw the light of day. It was buried under boxes of tackle, giant spools of monofilament, plastic bags with carefully rigged shark hooks on wire, shoeboxes stuffed with bank statements, cookbooks, charts with notations for future trips, a decade's worth of photos and stacks of fishing magazines.

The desk drawers held a bit of everything that defined him: a knife, a manual from an outboard he sold 15 years ago, loose ammunition, a handwritten note from my sister, an envelope of cash, broken sunglasses, tools and 18/0 circle hooks.

My eyes welled up when I found a bunch of magazines he had saved for nearly 20 years, dogeared to stories I had written. He saved a calendar from 2007 that published a few of my photos. "He always bragged about you to his fishing buddies," my mom said. I never really believed her, until I opened that drawer.

Corky fished for all manner of things, but he was most passionate about sharks, tuna and billfish. He'd go on marathon canyon trips, heading out Friday after work and returning Sunday evening. He'd roll in around dinner-time, sunburned and smiling, carrying Ziploc bags full of mako fillets, swordfish steaks or tuna loins. He was never boastful.

"How was the fishing?" I'd ask, and I'd get a simple *good* or *not so good* as he fired up a grill or fell into a chair. Later, I'd hear his friends, whom my mother kiddingly (I think) referred to as the village idiots, recount some tale of Corky catching a blue marlin on a skinny-water spinning rod. "The rod broke, and he had to handline it in." And when there was an engine issue, he was the first guy to climb into the bilge and, often, the last one out.



A humble man, Corky was a sharpie who never bragged about his success.

When I was a teenager, he hooked me up with cars and got me out of a few jams. In high school, a police officer pulled me over for rolling through a stop sign. I had beer on my breath. The cop knew Corky, so rather than drag me in, he followed me home to make sure I got there. Years later, Corky brought it up. "You knew about that?" I asked. He laughed, and I thanked him for not telling my mother.

When I was an editor at [REDACTED] magazine, I invited Corky on a trip to Ecuador. He didn't hesitate. He packed a small duffel no larger than a gym bag for a weeklong trip. He always traveled lightly. We flew to Salinas and fished for tuna and marlin out of Manta. He coached me on fighting fish in the chair. He let me wind on all of the big ones. He was happy helping the mate rig baits and set up the spread. I caught a wahoo that was so large it took two of us to hold it up, and my first Pacific blue marlin.

We dined with some of the wealthiest men in the country in a sprawling mansion with glove-clad butlers and a library with quite a collection of fishing books. We were so far

out of our element it felt like Mars, but Corky never wavered. He was just Corky. Always comfortable in his own skin no matter the setting. He charmed the guys in their blue blazers, recanting stories of giant tuna and sharing his uncanny knowledge of diesel engines.

Corky never cared much for doctors or medicine. He broke his leg in a motorcycle accident when he was in his 20s and never got a cast. He just went to work with a cane for a while. Decades of that kind of stuff eventually caught up to him. His later years were marked by pain in his knees and shoulders. He spent more time at his desk. Twisting wire, making shark rigs for his buddies. He also started rehabbing old spinning reels that he'd give to neighborhood kids. My parents lived on a quaint lake that was loaded with bass and pickerel. That brings up another Corky story: Apparently he would break into a state reservoir down the road that held a good population of fish. He'd catch bass, load them in buckets and bring them back to release in the lake.

When I had boys of my own, we'd visit in the summer and play in the lake all day, just as I did as a kid. Corky would sit and watch us, smiling. He'd tell a few stories and get my kids to dig up worms for bait. He wasn't the kind of guy who would give you a big hug or say I love you, but he had a soft side. I spotted him crying at my wedding. He showed his affection in different ways. When I was home from college, he'd peel off bills from the knot of cash he carried and stick a couple in my pocket.

If he liked you, he'd cook for you, and that was always a treat. Big rib roasts and baked-stuffed shrimp. Whenever I came around, he'd make me a lobster dinner. He knew what I liked to drink and always kept it on hand. That's how I knew he loved me.

With the rods stowed and the tackle organized into boxes based on targeted species and shoved into a closet until the weather warms, this corner of my parents' house was transformed. I polished the wooden desk and fixed a drawer pull that had fallen off. The contents were different now, but the globs of hardened epoxy and the black ink spots from markers used on hook points remained. And the rigs he left behind will go to his fishing buddies to be used, because that's what Corky would want.

As I looked at the newly cleaned desk, his exit felt real for the first time. The oak rolltop was no longer a workbench. It's a keeper of memories. 🐟