

Words Anders Wingqvist

The year was 1985, and a big package was laid out in front of me in my grandparents' living room. My eager young fingers tore at the wrapping paper. The picture on the box was of a castle made of gray Legos—stately knights mounted on white horses stood in front of the moat, with yellow pennants fluttering atop the castle turrets. I picked up the box and gave it a shake; the plastic-wrapped Lego pieces rattled within. I was little more than 4 years old at that point, but I quickly grasped that what I was holding in my hands promised several days of building fun, followed by hours of fun at play, and then still more hours of fun rebuilding the set.

A month earlier I'd heard the news that the family would be taking a trip to the mountains. Upon hearing the family's youngest member—me—wouldn't be coming along, I started wailing. The flood of tears may have been stemmed slightly by my parents' promise that Grandpa would take me skiing outside the town of Kållerød, and that a brand-new box of Legos would keep me busy for most of the week.

"You'll have to wait until after dinner to play with the Lego castle," Grandpa said. "Grandma has just finished making her vegetable soup and pancakes."

Grandpa stood 6-feet 5-inches, a bit stooped by age. He was frugal, nice but a bit stern, and a classic gentleman. I followed him into the kitchen. A half-hour later, I was seated on the floor in the living room, full and content and assembling a Lego knight, thinking I may have been the one who came out on top after all.

The next day, I wasn't so sure. Grandpa and I ventured into one of the bright, wintry days you get in Western Sweden. We were skiing; cross-country skiing. Or perhaps more accurately, walking in the snow with skis on.

I finally got a moment of positivity when we reached a small downhill slope, but the uphill afterward only fanned the flames of the 4-year-old's now-burning hatred.

"Ha, look at you, you fell again," Grandpa said. "Now you're down to 20 cents."

Grandpa's financial teaching methods—a starting sum of \$1.20, with 10-cent fines for every time I wiped out—may have been

well-intentioned, but it quickly cut into the funds with which I'd hoped to buy candy.

I struggled up and brushed off the snow. The crash was clearly worth the dime demerit, since it came at the end of a fairly steep downhill section.

By the time we got back to the house, I'd bailed so many times that I was in the red. Grandpa had a chuckle at this, but Grandma grew cross at the idea he'd put his grandchild in debt, even if it was imaginary. I walked in and tore down the Lego castle, only to start over from scratch, thinking angrily about my siblings who were out riding real skis.

The year after my cross-country misadventures in Kållerød, our family again took a winter vacation to the mountains, this time including its smallest member. And this time I got a different feel for what it is to ski. I was addicted to the speed immediately, just pointing my short skis downhill for a rush only hinted at by those small cross-country descents. I was barely 5 years old, but I understood the peaks and slopes around me promised more fun than all the Legos in the world.

What I didn't realize back then was those days would turn into weeks, years and eventually decades. Twenty-nine years later, I have long since maxed out my crash debt with Grandpa. But I still think of that Lego knight and those tiny downhill sections, and am grateful for every dime demerit. §



# WORTH EVERY DEMERIT

## LOATHE THE FLATS, LOVE THE SLOPES