

PATRIOTISM

Once in a Lifetime

“Well, gang, I’ve done it this time. I’ve really done it.”

Whenever my father said these words to our family, we all braced for impact; no one more so than my mother. Given her husband’s history of seizing the moment, regardless of whether the moment was worth seizing, she was accustomed to finding out about things she would have to do long after it was possible to get out of doing them.

“What did you do?” She asked apprehensively.

“I ordered tickets for the Olympics.”

“Way to go, Dad,” I said, confident this idea was one of his good ones.

“What Olympics?” My mother asked.

“The Winter ones. In Lake Placid. In February,” he responded, his last word hanging in the air like an icicle.

“Will we be outdoors?” She asked with barely contained dread.

“A little bit,” he said.

“Won’t it be freezing?” My mother asked; her fear of the cold surfacing.

“Not at all. It’s actually *warmer* up in the mountains.”

“Honey, you know I’ve got terrible circulation and I hate to be cold,” she reminded him.

“They’ll have all kinds of heating stations. There’s nothing to worry about. Plus, most of the events, like hockey and figure skating, are inside.”

“I really don’t want the kids to miss school,” my mother said; trying another avenue to defeat the plan.

“They won’t; not more than a week.”

“A week? That’s too long,” she pleaded.

“Come on. It’s the Olympics,” my father said, immediately breaking into a forlorn rendition of the event’s theme song. “Bommmm . . . bommmm . . . ba dumm dumm dumm . . .”

“I’m serious,” my mother replied, cutting him off mid-theme.

“I promise they won’t miss more than a day or two. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for our family.”

This was one of my father’s favorite lines; one he used shamelessly to weaken his opposition on any number of matters, but somehow it worked. And just like that, with my mother out of ammunition, it was settled: we were headed for the 1980 Winter Olympics.

From that point forward, we mostly forgot about it. It was the summer of 1979 and with February still far off, we quickly gravitated back to the ordinary events of the season; swimming, tennis and going for ice cream. Soon, the first day of school beckoned; keeping our attention miles away from Lake Placid, a condition that would have persisted if not for the events of November 4th when a group of Islamic students forcibly seized control of the American embassy in Iran and took 53 hostages.

Up until that point in my life, I had been blissfully unaware of conflict in the Middle East, radical terrorists and, frankly, geopolitical unrest of any sort; preferring to focus instead on important domestic issues, like determining the release date for the next Styx album. But the Iranian hostage crisis, as it was called by the media, forced me to leave my childlike views behind and realize that certain events occurring far away could affect me at home. Night after night we watched the news coverage on TV, and it wasn’t long before reporters began asking what it meant for the Olympics. Seeing that I would soon be part of an international story, I suddenly had newfound respect for my father and his “once in a lifetime” promises.

As the winter months went on and the hostages remained under siege, tension grew and speculation ran rampant about what to expect in Lake Placid. Because an Iranian bobsled team or delegation of any sort was never a possibility given the nation’s desert location, the question was whether any countries would take Iran’s side and boycott the Olympics to show solidarity. I didn’t understand at first how a sporting competition could be so politically-charged, but then I learned about the 1972 Munich games, where eleven Israeli athletes and coaches had been killed by terrorists, and the 1976 Montreal games, where 28 African countries boycotted due to a New Zealand rugby team’s decision earlier that year to tour South Africa, despite its policy of apartheid. Whoa, I thought. Dad’s really taking us into the heart of darkness.

By the time February arrived, American nationalism was at a fever pitch and all eyes turned to Lake Placid, where U.S. citizens would have a perfect opportunity to show their patriotism to the rest of the world. Ready to do my part, I climbed into the family car with proud determination; keenly aware that I was headed for the middle of a major happening and needed to support my homeland. Of course, it was 2:00 a.m. and I promptly fell asleep within ten minutes. In all the excitement of securing tickets to the games, my father neglected to book a hotel room (all of which were sold out by now).

This meant an all-night drive to the Adirondacks, New York’s largest mountain range, something I’m not sure my mother was pleased about. Nothing, however, could dampen my father’s enthusiasm.

“The O’Dwyer family is going for the gold,” he exclaimed as we pulled out of our driveway in the middle of a snowstorm.

“Do you think it’s okay to go in this weather?” My mother asked, gripping her door handle and double-checking her seatbelt. “They’re talking about closing the thruway,” she said.

“It’s absolutely fine,” my father said, having never met a weather event that kept him from traveling. “Besides, if we don’t go now, we won’t make it on time.”

“Why didn’t we drive up yesterday and stay at a hotel?” My sister asked.

“Just go to sleep, all right,” he replied, a bit perturbed.

When I woke up, we were in a parking lot surrounded by hundreds of other cars.

“Let’s go,” my father barked.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“We have to get in line for the shuttle bus,” my mother explained while handing us mittens, hats and scarves.

“That’s right. The shuttle bus is going to take us to our events,” my father said.

“Which events do we have tickets for, Dad?” I asked. “We’ve got ice hockey tickets, right?”

“Well, not exactly,” he said.

“We don’t?” I asked, unable to hide my disappointment.

“Do have figure skating tickets, Dad?” My sister asked.

“Not quite,” he said. “Look, guys, the tickets I got were handed out by lottery so I didn’t get to pick the sports. It was all luck of the draw.”

“So what did we draw?” My mother asked. “The opening ceremonies?”

“No,” my father said.

“Speed skating?” My sister asked.

“No, not that either,” he said.

“Then what did we draw, Dad?” I asked excitedly.

Like a man tasked with selling steak to a group of vegetarians, my father gave us his best pitch.

“We drew the second run of the men’s giant slalom *and* the 90 meter ski jump. How does *that* hit you?”

For ten seconds, it was dead quiet inside the car.

“Are those held indoors?” My mother asked, breaking the silence.

“Not really,” my father said.

With one collective groan, we climbed out of our station wagon and stepped into the Arctic Circle. Although it was sunny, a strong current of frigid air whipped us as we trekked toward a distant mass of people waiting for shuttle buses to the various venues.

Despite the weather, the crowd we joined fifteen minutes later was bursting with jingoistic fervor; chanting “U-S-A” repeatedly and staring hard at anyone speaking a foreign language. Taking our place among the throng, we added our voices to the chorus with gusto and, for a brief moment in time, we believed that maybe, just maybe, my father’s decision to drag us outside in life-threatening temperatures to support our country’s athletes was not completely insane.

“U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!” We bellowed, standing next to a man whose winter hat had a picture of Mickey Mouse saying, “Hey, Iran,” and doing something with his middle finger I’d never seen Mickey do. Through the bright, white glare of sunshine bouncing off snow, we saw my father’s vision for an unforgettable O’Dwyer family outing.

Two hours later, however, that vision was getting cloudy. Underestimating the number of attendees, the Olympic organizers failed to send enough shuttle buses; leaving the horde of hundreds outside for far longer than recommended given the sub-zero conditions.

“Mom, my feet are freezing,” I said.

“Mine, too, Mom,” my sister echoed.

“I know kids. Honey, did you put the wool liners I gave you into the kids’ boots?” My mother asked my father.

“What liners?” He asked.

And so it went as we got colder, the mob grew uglier and bus sightings remained rare. Eventually, chants of “U-S-A” gave way to something a bit more practical.

“Where’s the effin bus? Where’s the effin bus?” They shouted over and over.

“What’s ‘effin’ mean, Mom?” I asked.

After three hours of standing, we made it onto a shuttle bus, stumbling to the back and huddling like immigrants rescued from icy waters. My father, however, was not ready to give up on his Olympic dream.

“The good news is we’re still going to make the 90 meter ski jump. It only started an hour ago,” he said.

“You mean we have to go back outdoors?” My mother asked, her frozen hands fumbling to undo the emergency Thermos of hot coffee she’d packed.

“I can’t feel my toes, Dad,” I said.

“Come on, guys,” my father said. “This is a once in lifetime experience.”

“Let’s hope so,” my mother said, shivering as she tried to affix her lips to the Thermos.

Higher and higher into the mountains we climbed until, mercilessly, the bus driver stopped and told us we’d reached our destination; casting us back out into Antarctica.

Hiking northward like an ill-fated Everest expedition, we soon stood somewhere on the side of Whiteface Mountain watching colored dots in the distance launch themselves high into the air off an enormous ski jump. But after two Finns, a Brit and a Jamaican completed their runs, our spectating came to an abrupt end. Fearing one of us might suffer the loss of an appendage if we stayed any longer; my mother led my sister and me to the nearest Red Cross station for medical attention while my father reluctantly followed behind.

“The American hasn’t even gone yet,” he called after her; hoping he might earn a temporary stay of the decision.

“I don’t care,” my mother called back. “The kids are popsicles.”

The rest of our Olympic experience was spent staring at the ceiling of a tent as a team of EMTs and paramedics tried to bring our toes back to life. Driving home later that day, I think my father felt defeated. He desperately wanted his family to have a memorable time but nothing had gone according to plan and now he wondered if it had all been worth the effort.

A few days later, like most Americans, we gathered around the TV and watched the U.S. hockey team defeat the U.S.S.R. juggernaut 4-3 in what now is the most famous Olympic hockey game of all-time. With the Cold War raging and our fellow citizens being held hostage in Iran, we banded together and rooted wildly for our country to win. And when the announcer, Al Michaels, asked, “Do you believe in miracles?” as the last seconds of the final period ticked away, the collective answer in our family room was a resounding, “yes.”

Of course, you could argue that the game didn’t change anything. It didn’t improve our relations with Russia or free the hostages, and it wasn’t even the squad’s final test, which would occur two days later against Finland. But at our house, the U.S. hockey team’s victory over the Soviets felt like a victory for us and that night, our family, like millions of other American families, got its gold medal. After much disappointment, we were lifted up unexpectedly and were grateful for it.

These days, when the topic of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team comes up, I’m quick to point out that I was in Lake Placid that year. After which, I’m invariably asked: “Were you at the hockey game with the Russians?”

“Of course, I was,” I always say, embellishing a bit. “My father got tickets and drove us there in the middle of the night through a snowstorm.”

“What was it like?” They always want to know and so I answer.

“It’s hard to describe,” I say. “It was truly a once in a lifetime experience.”