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The Pelletier twins, Rejean and Ronnie, raced across the centre line. If not for the different numbers on their backs, it would have been impossible to tell the two Morinville forwards apart.

Ronnie smacked the puck across the blue line, and it cracked as it hit the blade of Rejean's stick. The Barrhead defenceman skated backwards, trying to guess Rejean's next move. As the defenceman hesitated, Rejean took off in a blue and white flash, driving towards the goalie.

The goalie came out of his net, trying to cut off the angle. Rejean raised his stick as if he was going to shoot the puck right *through* the netminder. But, at the last second, he flicked a pass towards Ronnie.

Ronnie simply directed the puck into the open net.

The crowd around Branko Stimac erupted. Branko lost sight of the ice as the people in front of him rose to their feet. He didn't bother getting up from his seat. He didn't join the *chump-chump-chump* of applause from fans

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whose clapping hands were muffled by their mittens.

“Wow, isn’t this exciting!” said Branko’s friend, Scottie, as he flipped his camera over so he could look at the little screen on the back. “I hope I got that.”

“Not really,” said Branko. “Ronnie and Rejean just scored another goal in a game we all knew they were going to win.”

The goal had just put the Morinville Warriors up 4–1. Ronnie had scored all four home-team goals. Rejean had set up all four.

Scottie hit the playback button with his thumb. “Darn. Looks like they’re playing in a snowstorm. Branko, I wish I could stop this lens from fogging up. It’s just too cold in the arena.”

Branko and Scottie always made sure to sit in the row that was right under the heat lamps that hung from the ceiling, but still there was no getting around how cold it was. The mist seeped out of their mouths as they exhaled. And there was no escaping the smell — a mix of hot chocolate, coffee, and French fries.

“You know, you put a lot of effort into blogging about two guys who don’t like you, Scottie. Do you remember when we came here for the public skate? The Pelletiers put a chair out for you! They told everybody you skated like a three-year-old!”

Scottie shook his head. His dad had told him that if he wanted to work for the paper, he had to “have thick skin.” Which meant writing good things about people

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who didn't like you and not being afraid to criticize the people who did like you. It was messed up, Scottie thought, but his dad had run the town paper since before he was born, and it did just fine.

"You know what, Branko? That doesn't matter." Scottie raised the camera and pointed the lens towards the ice. "The Pelletiers might be famous one day. Heck, they knew Gretzky was gonna play in the NHL when he was what? Nine! People from all over the country visit my blog to see what the Pelletiers did!"

"I just don't get it. Why does everyone like hockey so much? You sit here shivering. The puck is so small you can't follow it. Everybody moves so quickly you can't read the plays. And, the guys only play a minute at a time. Now, soccer — *that's* a real sport! You have to stay on for the whole ninety minutes!"

"Oh, hey," said Scottie, lowering his camera. "You've got that tryout coming up, right?"

"Yes," said Branko. "It's tomorrow at eight a.m." Tomorrow he would try out to be the goalkeeper for Edmonton's top junior soccer team, the Selects. Tomorrow the years of driving to tournaments in Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, and Lethbridge would finally pay off. Tomorrow was going to be the biggest day of his life.

"Branko, can I write about the tryout in the blog? Put it on the newspaper's website!"

"Why? No one in Morinville would care."

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The crowd *oohed* as one of Morinville's second liners knocked down a kid from Barrhead at centre ice. Scottie quickly brought his camera back up to his eye. "Darn! I missed it!"

The stands were packed. Parents hollered and clapped. Kids lined up at the concession stands, clutching loonies in their cold hands. On a Saturday night, the Ray McDonald Sports Centre — which most people still called by its old name, the Agriplex — was *the* place to be in Morinville.

Branko had moved to Morinville from Edmonton when he was five, but he still felt like the strange kid in town. In eight years, Scottie was the only real friend he'd made. Branko had tried to fit in with the other boys, but he couldn't join their conversations about the hockey games they had watched or their dreams of making it to the NHL. He had once tried to explain ice hockey in a letter to his grandfather, who had politely replied, "Ice hockey? Don't they play that once every four years at the Olympics?"

In Branko's family, soccer was everything. Branko's father, Josip, had played professionally in Croatia (then part of Yugoslavia) before the civil war, and he had started teaching Branko the game as soon as he could walk.

Scottie leaned forward as the Pelletiers hit the ice for another shift. A Warriors player slid the puck into Rejean's feet. Without missing a beat, Rejean kicked the puck towards his stick, caressing it on the blade

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as he hit the blue line. He streaked along the boards, around the Barrhead defenceman. He swooped behind the goal as his brother hit the slot. One quick pass, and Ronnie one-timed his shot through the legs of the goaltender.

The crowd roared again.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Branko, the buzzer sounded. The crowd gave the Pelletiers a standing ovation as they skated a post-game victory lap. Branko got up, too — not to clap, but because he wanted to leave his seat and go someplace warm.

Branko filed out to the lobby with the crowd, while Scottie headed down the stairs to the dressing-room area to get some quotes from the Pelletiers.

Branko waited at the main concession for his friend as the fans slowly made their way out into the frigid night air. Scottie arrived just as the concessionaires were closing up for the night.

“Sorry, had to get all the interviews done. You didn’t have to wait for me.”

“What would be the point in rushing home?” said Branko, shuffling his boots. “I didn’t sleep much last night and I know I won’t sleep tonight. I’ll just lie in my bed and stare at the ceiling, worrying about the tryout. So I may as well be here.”

Scottie laughed. “I guess that’s sort of a compliment. That you’d rather hang out with me than stare at a ceiling.”