The Hungry Gods Go to the Tournament

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I bought the first ticket myself, at ten to six, to get the pot going. That's just what you do. An empty jar looks like nobody believes in it.

Two dollars for one, five for three, twenty for an arm's length, and the arm is mine. The record for a Pumpkin Classic 50/50 is $1,140, set by Marlene Fehr in 2019, and Marlene Fehr has mentioned this to me at every tournament since, including one in Kamloops she did not attend.

I put my ticket in my coat pocket and opened the cash box and waited for the doors.

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U9 plays half-ice. They put a foam divider across the middle of the sheet, a long blue thing like a pool noodle that went to university, and two games go on at once, one on each side. That's four teams on the ice and about eighty parents in the stands, and officially nobody keeps score. Hockey Canada says at this age it's about development. Every parent in the building keeps score. No two of them have the same score. My husband had us up four–one by the second shift and I would not have put it higher than two–two.

The referee did both halves. His name on the game sheet was SEEKER, and he was a tall man in stripes who skated back and forth across the divider with a little notebook in his glove, which I had never seen a referee do.

In the third minute a puck came out of the far game, went under the divider, and slid into our net.

Everybody looked at the Seeker.

He picked the puck out of the net and looked at it. He skated to the divider and looked over it. He looked at the far net, where the far goalie was looking for the puck, and back at our net, where our goalie, who is my son Brody, was lying down for reasons of his own.

"I can't say which game that was in," the Seeker said.

"It was in ours!" said a grandfather behind me.

"It was in yours," the Seeker agreed. "I can't say what game it was."

He wrote in the notebook. He dropped the puck again. Then he dropped another puck in the far game, because they had been playing without one.

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The music and the scoreboard were run by a young man up in the booth whose name, according to the arena's staff board by the canteen, was CHAOS-WEAVER. He had his feet on the desk.

He played the horn during the anthem. Not at the end. In the middle, around "glorious and free," one long blast, and everybody flinched — the kids, the parents, a dad holding a

coffee who will be cleaning his jacket into November. Then he played it again at the actual end, which was correct, but by then nobody trusted it.

When the other team scored, he played our goal song. When we scored, he played theirs. When nobody scored, he played "Celebration," for one game and then the other. Before long both teams were celebrating every goal, theirs and ours, because there was no way to tell from the music. By the end of the first ice slot the scoreboard said 14–0 for the home team, in a game with no home team, which nobody was scoring.

"I'm just running a test," he called down, to nobody, when a coach looked up.

* * *

I sold. I want that on the record.

I sold to our parents and I sold to their parents. I sold to opposing grandparents in matching jackets who had driven out from Mission at four in the morning and were in no state to refuse me. I sold to a man who had only come in to use the washroom; he wrote his phone number on the stub and left before the second ice slot, and I don't believe he knew which game he'd been watching either.

I sold to the Zamboni driver. HAND, his jacket said. He brought the ice out between slots so smooth you could have read a newspaper on it, and the first child onto it fell over immediately, and so did the next one, and Hand watched them from the machine door the way you'd watch weather. He bought one ticket with a toonie he already had in his hand.

By eight-thirty I was out of tickets.

The canteen had a roll. Orange instead of blue, for the Saturday meat draw. I borrowed it. I was going to bring it back.

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The second slot was where the Seeker had his difficulty.

There was a goal, at the far end of our half, where eight children ended up in one heap in front of the net, which at U9 is not a scramble, it's just where the children go. The puck was in the net under all of them. Brody was, as far as I could tell, at the bottom.

The Seeker skated over and stood at the edge of the heap.

"Who shot it?"

Eight hands went up out of the pile. Some of them were on the other team.

He asked each of them, one by one, as they came out. He wrote down each answer. Each answer was "me."

"Goal," the Seeker said, and wrote it. "Attribution unconfirmed."

Then, two minutes later, he called a trip, a clear one, a little girl in green taken down by a boy in white. He skated to the boy and asked for his name.

"Liam."

He said, "Box, please, Liam," and three Liams skated to the penalty box. Nobody stopped them. The Seeker looked at them sitting there in a row, three small Liams in white on the little bench with their legs not reaching the floor, and wrote in his notebook for some time, and let them serve it together.

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The skate-sharpening window is beside the canteen, and the woman in it has a little card on the counter that says COMPANION, and below that, SHARPENING $8.

At U9, skates are a problem. Nobody's parents can do them up tight enough. Your fingers are cold, and the laces are wet, and you've been up since half past four, and every child's foot moves around inside the boot like a hamster in a sock.

She noticed. She had a line at the window, and between sharpenings she started taking the kids one at a time onto the stool and redoing the laces. Properly. Hook by hook, the way your dad would have if your dad was a sailor. She did ours. She did theirs. She did both teams on the far side of the divider. She did a girl who wasn't even playing, just there with her brother, who walked around afterward in her sneakers looking very supported.

By the second intermission every U9 skate in the building had been done up at that window. You could see it on the ice. They stopped falling over. Not completely, but noticeably. They went to the puck and stopped there, and some of them turned.

Both coaches took credit.

"That's the edge work," our coach said, to me. "We did edges Tuesday."

I went back up to sell. On the way I passed the window, and she leaned out and bought a ticket from me, five dollars for three. Then she asked me how I was doing.

Not the 50/50. Me.

I'd like to say I said "fine." What I said was that I'd been up since quarter past four and that my husband had us winning four–one and that Marlene Fehr had told me in August that orange is a hard colour for a jar, and then I stood with the cash box against my stomach and had to look at the ceiling for a second.

She waited. Then she put a toonie in the cash box on top of the five.

"For the pot," she said.

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The Conscience-Keeper does the draw. He works for the association; he holds the gaming licence, and he has a lanyard about it. Before the last game he stood at the canteen with my cash box and the stubs and a calculator and said he would announce the winner when every stub was accounted for.

"They're all there," I said.

"There are two colours," he said.

There were. He wanted to know about the orange. I told him about the canteen. He looked at the orange stubs for some time, the way you'd look at a dog that had come into church. Then he got the meat-draw sheet from the canteen, matched every orange number against it, wrote something on the back of his licence copy, and drew.

The pot was $1,248. The winner's half was $624. That is a Pumpkin Classic record, and I want that on the record too.

The Chaos-Weaver read the number over the speakers and played "Celebration."

Nobody came.

He read it again. Nobody came. Parents checked pockets and car keys and other parents' pockets. The grandparents from Mission went through their jackets, which took a while because they had matching ones. The Seeker came off the ice and stood beside the Conscience-Keeper and said, helpfully, that he could not confirm who it belonged to.

I went up and down the stands for the last game. I went into the washroom. I went to the parking lot. I checked the bottom of Brody's bag, in case.

Then I put my hand in my coat pocket for my phone.

It was blue. It said the number. It had been in there since ten to six.

I took it to the Conscience-Keeper and put it on the counter and he turned it over and read the back to me out loud, which he did not need to do, because I'm the one who wrote it: *Sellers and their immediate families are not eligible.*

Brody came up behind me then, with his helmet still on, and asked if he could have a toonie for the slushie machine. There was $1,248 on the counter. I gave him one out of my own wallet.

The Conscience-Keeper nodded, as though this was what he had thought, and drew again.

It was the man who'd come in to use the washroom. He'd written his phone number on the stub. The Conscience-Keeper called it from the canteen phone.

It went to voicemail.

He left a message. It was very thorough.