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The Yogurt Man Cometh

St. Norbert College

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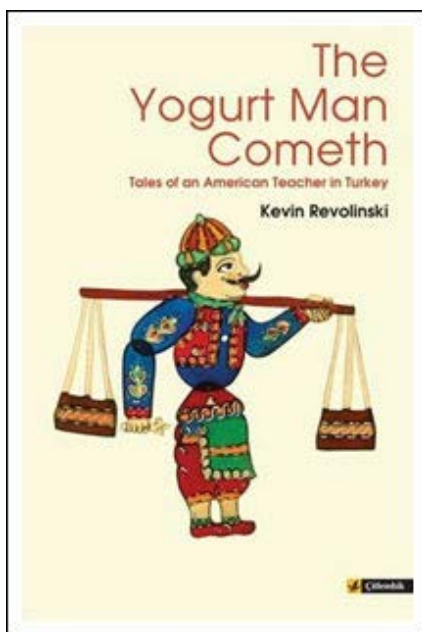
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The Yogurt Man Cometh

Kevin Revolinski '90 has made travel work in a big way. The author of eight travel books, his writing has appeared in The New York Times, the Chicago Tribune and more.

We told his story in Making Travel Work. Enjoy this excerpt from his account of his year in Turkey, "The Yogurt Man Cometh."

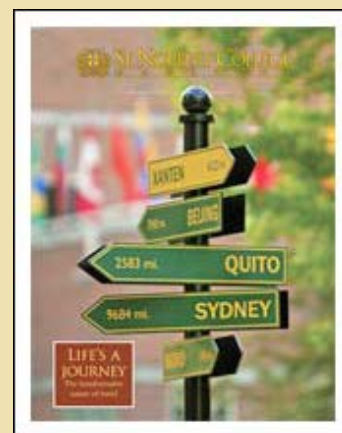
The Yogurt Man Cometh By Kevin Revolinski '90

It's Turkey. Too tired to go out for absurdity? Not to worry. They deliver. It's early on a Saturday. I am slow getting out of bed but at the sound of the door buzzer, I leap into my jeans and race Chad down the hall of our apartment. We don't get a lot of unexpected visitors at the door.

There is a man, unshaven but friendly looking enough. Having had so many experiences with kind and generous Turks, we have become naively conditioned to expect everyone here to be trustworthy. He smiles and breaks into a spiel in Turkish. Whoa, slow down there, my friend. We warn him that we know very little Turkish and he hesitates for a moment, and then starts with what Turks call *Tarzanca*, or Tarzan language, Turkish spoken without conjugating verbs or using proper articles and such. Probably like most everybody we meet, he assumes we are German tourists. *Almanca?* they usually ask.

He indicates his bag of goodies. I manage to decipher occasional words from a long stream of Turkish: milk, I hear, cheese, yogurt. Ah, a door-to-door yogurt guy. The *kapici*, the building manager, provides similar to-the-door service for the neighbors. We can leave money in a basket outside our door and the *kapici* will go and buy fresh bread for us every day. We have even seen packages in our neighbors' baskets from the supermarket downtown. So here is a guy who wants us on some kind of yogurt route maybe.

He sees our confusion and acts. He points inside and we gesture to



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him to come in. He declines, hesitant as all Turks are about entering someone's home with their shoes on. But he directs me from the door. He keeps saying a word that we don't know. I go to the cupboard. Ah, he's thirsty. I bring him a glass of water and he downs it but is not sated. He says some other things and I am back in the kitchen pointing to things and checking for his reaction. I open the cupboard and he nods with excitement. I feel like a trained rat.

He points and repeats this strange word. I grab a small pot. He says something else. Bigger, I understand. OK, a pot. But a bigger one. I find one under the sink. *Evet, evet*. Yes, yes. I bring it to the door and he points to it with relief as though now we all understand. Bemused, I hand it to him. He opens his bag, unscrews a large bottle of white goop and pours it in. Whoa. Hold on there, fella. He deftly empties another into the pot before I can stop him. We now have a HUGE pot of yogurt. Um. And he wants money. Um. Well, we surely don't eat a lot of yogurt. Definitely not damn near two gallons of it. We tell him no and he smiles politely showing us the obvious: we already have it. Now pay up. Um. I call to my other housemate: "Bob? Get the dictionary." The man is patient, but I can see it draining from him as Bob pages through the dictionary and we try to piece together the words to tell the man that we hadn't understood what was happening. We don't want the yogurt. But you have the yogurt. I cannot take it back now. Hm. OK, how much? 500,000 lira. Sigh. A cheap lesson, get the money.

Chad and I return with a 500,000 bill. Now he is annoyed. Not 500,000. 500,000 per kilo. He squints at the pot. That's six kilos. Three million. Now that is a lot of clams for a bucket of what more than likely will go to waste. Now comes the standoff. No. We will not pay three million for a bucket of yogurt. Arguing and gesticulations. He keeps waving his arms at the pot which we keep trying to hand back to him. Take the pot. Keep it. Look up "keep," Bob. How did he say "pot" before? Look up "pot." We don't want the yogurt.

OK. Two and a half million.

It's not the money. We just don't want it. This unintended haggling goes on for some time until his partner comes up the stairs. By this time he is down to one million and a half. The partner is fuming and for a moment I am nervous. But there is a door between us if necessary. He says he cannot take it back and sell it because it has been in our pot. I'm thinking, hell, it's yogurt. It's bacteria culture for godsake. And judging by the looks of these guys I doubt if their operation would pass any government health inspections.

We don't want the yogurt.

You must take it.

A battle of wills. Now in a rare moment of assertiveness, I am fuming. *Bak*. (Look.) *Yogurt...u sev..miyorum. Yogurtu ist...emi...yorum. Yogurtu yemi yorum*. (I don't like the yogurt. I don't want the yogurt. I don't eat the yogurt.) *Anladın mı?* Do you understand? We are shoving it back and forth through the door and I fear we will spill it. We will not budge now. There will be no lesson in language today. This yogurt is going back if we have to leave the pot on the stoop and slam the door. They are, however, on the threshold. The partner disappears, cursing no doubt. The other one is smoking a cigarette with daggers in his eyes. Nope. No yogurt. Take it. Take the damn pot.

Then our hero arrives. The *kapıcı*. Unlike that of some of the Turkish



On the road

Images and reflections from a sabbatical journey undertaken by **Brian Pirman** (Art).



The Yogurt Man Cometh

A chapter to enjoy from this travelogue in Turkey, recounted by author **Kevin Revolinski '90**.



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women we have observed up to this point, this woman's authority does not diminish in the presence of a man. She tells the guy off. One and a half million? That is ridiculous. And that is NOT six kilos. She lets him have it and he doesn't meet her eye. A rather emasculating moment for him no doubt. He fumes and puffs a bit but she stands firm now between us. He leaves with the pot and we see out the window that he is using a spatula to transfer the yogurt to the jars in the back of a truck. Our *kapıcı* was scowling until he disappeared down the steps with the pot, and the woman across the hall is leaning out now anxiously. When he is gone they both look at each other and laugh. We are sighing with relief and thanking her. She shrugs it off and warns us in gestures and *Tarzanca* to just close the door next time. We, of course, feel stupid for having let him go so far as dumping his fare into one of our own containers.

The man returns with the empty container and brushes past the *kapıcı* on his way out. Chad bellows a cheery *İyi günler*. Good day! Back inside we slap each other on the back for not being taken. The guy had known we had no idea what was going on. "Boy, they sure were ticked off," says Bob.

I think about that for a moment and how in the States I would be a little nervous that they might come back and be vengeful about it. But I know better here. "The funny thing is, guys? Somewhere a couple of yogurt guys are driving around really ticked off at the Germans."

Kevin Revolinski's articles and photography have appeared in a variety of publications including the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Miami Herald*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He is the author of *The Wisconsin Beer Guide: A Travel Companion* and several works of short fiction. He lived in Ankara, Turkey, in 1997 and 1998 and has traveled back there several times since. He currently lives in Madison, Wis.

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