

The Last Gobble Before Thanksgiving

by D. E. Brigham

I COVER MY nervousness with a smile as I stand with the teacher in front of my new sixth grade class. Ms. Ramos places her hand on my shoulder. My heart is pounding.

“Please welcome Mustafa Korkmaz,” she says. “Mustafa has just moved to Florida from his home in Turkey while his father teaches at the university. I’m sure we will learn a lot about Turkey and Turkish culture from Mustafa this year.”

Several students say “Hello,” “Hi,” and “Welcome.”

“Hello,” I say. I know first impressions are important, so I am careful not to stumble as I walk to my assigned desk at the end of the row. Before I sit down, a boy, bigger than the others, brings his fist to his mouth and wiggles his fingers under his chin.

“Gobble-gobble,” he says in a high-pitched voice. A few students laugh. He does it again.

TURKEY IS A COUNTRY IN THE MIDDLE EAST.



Illustrated by Kyle Reed

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I don't know why he is making these sounds, but it cannot be good for me.

"We'll have none of that, Brodie," says Ms. Ramos. Her stern look silences him. Brodie lowers his fist and folds his hands on his desk.

Later that morning, while the class is working on an assignment, Ms. Ramos calls Sammy and me to her desk. Sammy is a tall, thin boy, who sits in front of me.

"Sammy," she says. "Would you be Mustafa's buddy this week and help him through each day? Be sure to sit with him at lunch and introduce him to your friends."

"Sure," says Sammy, "no problem." He turns to me. "I moved here from India last year when my father was transferred by his company. I know how hard it is to move to a new country."

"Thanks," I say. We head back to our desks. I am happy to have a new friend, but I hear the noise again. "Gobble-gobble. Gobble-gobble." This time the sound is not loud enough for the teacher to hear. Two rows over, Brodie crouches behind the student in front of him and points at me. He pretends to laugh. He slaps his knee with his hand.

"Why does Brodie make that noise?" I ask Sammy.

"In America, *turkey* isn't just the name of your country," he says. "It's the name of a bird that we eat at Thanksgiving. *Gobble* is the sound this bird makes."

"I have read about Thanksgiving," I say. "The Turkish word for the Thanksgiving bird is *hindi*. *Hindi* is also Turkish for *India*."

"Wow! I didn't know that," says Sammy. "But don't worry about Brodie. Ignore him."

I look up *ignore* in my English-Turkish dictionary. Throughout the day, Brodie gobbles at me whenever he gets the chance. I ignore him, but not before he sees the anger in my eyes as I look away. He knows it bothers me.

At dinner Aisha, my ten-year-old sister, and I tell my parents about our first day at school. Of course, Aisha has had a wonderful day. She's a chatterbox and makes friends easily. I tell my family about my new friend Sammy and my problem with Brodie.

"Don't give Brodie any attention," says Aisha. "He will get tired soon."

"I tried that," I say. "It doesn't work. He still teases me. He even told someone from another class that my name is Gobble."

"Mustafa," says Father. "You are a smart boy. I know you will solve this problem. *Inshallah*, God willing."

"Meanwhile," Mother says, "I have a surprise." She lifts the foil from a baking sheet.

"Baklava!" Aisha and I shout.

"A store nearby has everything I need to make baklava," says Mother.

She slices us generous wedges of our favorite Turkish pastry. I bite through twelve layers of thin, crispy dough and let my teeth sink slowly into the sweet filling of chopped pistachio nuts and honey. The special sweetness flooding my mouth transports me to my hometown of Gaziantep, famous throughout Turkey for its delicious baklava. For a moment, my problems melt away.

I THINK BRODIE IS THE
TURKEY IN THIS STORY! ...



I FIND THAT REMARK OFFENSIVE AND
INSULTING TO TURKEYS.



But for the rest of the week Brodie’s behavior gets even worse. Whenever I pass near his desk, he gobbles. When I get a drink at the fountain, he stops to get one, too, so he can lean over and gobble into my ear. Sooner or later I will have to stand up to him, even though he towers above me. I am running out of patience.

On Monday I drag myself to school, knowing that Brodie will be waiting to tease me. Three gobbles into the day we have gym. I stand with my class on the athletic field. Our gym teacher, Coach Stephens, tells us that we are going to play soccer. I have never

heard of soccer, but when Coach holds up a soccer ball, my heart leaps.

“Çok güzel! Awesome!” I blurt out.
“Futbol!”

Everyone is silent. I feel embarrassed.

“Not football,” Coach says. “Soccer.”

“In Turkey, we say *futbol*. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Coach says. “People around the world call this game *football*. That’s the most common name for this sport. Thanks for reminding us.”

Coach selects two captains who choose team members. To my surprise, I am chosen last. Last! In Turkey, I am usually one of the

I’M OFTEN CHOSEN LAST IN
FOOTBALL. (SIGH)



first players chosen. Maybe they think I'm too small to play well.

Each of us takes a blue or red vest out of a large cardboard box and puts it on. My team is red, so I pull out a red vest. It hangs below my waist. But I like it. It is the color of the Turkish flag.

The teams spread out across the field. Coach says the red team has an extra player. My captain, Olivia, looks down our line of players until her eyes fall on me. She points at me and then to the bench.

"I'll put you back in later," she says. "After we have the lead."

Tears blur my vision as I walk to the bench. She thinks I am a second-rate player. I wipe dew off the bench with my hand and sit alone as the two teams race up and down the field, shouting with excitement. After a while, I grow restless and pull a soccer ball from the ball bag next to the bench. I run my fingers over the cool surface of the ball. I decide to warm up, so I'll be ready when Olivia calls me back into the game—if our team ever gets ahead.

I flip the ball with the tip of my sneaker and bat it from foot to foot without letting it touch the ground. Then I tap the ball up to my thighs, where I dribble it back and forth from thigh to thigh. I knee the ball up to my forehead and bounce it three times above my head before letting it drop to the ground, where I trap it with the toe of my shoe. Then I begin my routine again.

It is quiet. I look up to see that play has stopped. Both teams stare at me. A few players



have their mouths open as though I am a magician. I grab my ball and squeeze it.

"Hey," Olivia says. "Come on in." She motions a boy out. His face is red. He seems happy for a chance to rest.

I drop my ball and race onto the field. After the throw-in, Olivia gets the ball and immediately passes it to me. I trap it and look downfield.





“We need a quick score,” she says. “We’re behind 3 to 2, and time is running out.”

Two boys rush at me. I don’t move. I wait. When they get close enough, I dribble right, then left, then cut sharply back to the right, leaving the first boy behind. When the second boy stabs at the ball with his foot, I poke it through his open legs, speed around

him, and dribble toward the goal. The goalie comes out to meet me. Brodie!

“Gobble-gobble,” he says. “This is going to be like taking candy from a baby.”

I let the ball continue to roll toward him. Brodie pulls back his foot to kick it down field, but I flip the ball to the left as he grunts and kicks at the air. I dash past him and tap the ball into the open net.

“Goal!” Coach shouts and raises his arms. “Tie score! Two minutes left.”

Our team cheers. Several players slap my hand and my back, including Sammy, who runs all the way from his goalie position.

“We need one more,” says Olivia. We take our positions.

The blue team kicks off and marches down the field as our defense tries to hold. They get a clear shot on our goal, but Sammy makes a spectacular diving save. Then our team begins moving the ball back up the field. A teammate passes the ball to me. “Take it and score!” he shouts.

But scoring requires teamwork, so I dribble around a defender and pass it back. I see coach check his watch.

As we near the goal Brodie stays home this time. He stands in front of the goal with his long arms outstretched and his teeth clenched. I have the ball and approach Brodie from his right while Olivia gets into position to his left. Her eyes tell me she is ready to make her move. She runs. I pass. She kicks. The ball hits Brodie’s knee and careens upward. I jump and plant my forehead into the ball, sending it into the far corner of the goal as Brodie lunges and slides on his stomach across the grass.

Coach throws both arms up and blows his whistle. “Game over! Red wins: 4 to 3!” Coach looks at me. “You’re quite a football player.”

I smile back. Brodie gets up off the ground but turns away when I look at him.

On the way back to our classroom building, Olivia taps my shoulder. “Sorry I made

you sit on the bench,” she says. “I had no idea you were such an awesome player.”

“Football—I mean soccer—is Turkey’s national sport,” I say. “We play soccer as soon as we can walk.”

“Way to go!” says Sammy. “I don’t think you are going to hear any more gobbles before Thanksgiving.”

After school, I invite Olivia and Sammy to my house to see photos of my home and friends in Turkey. While they sit in our living room swiping through photos on our tablet, I dash into the kitchen where my mother meets me with a plate of baklava.

“Thanks, *Anne*—I mean Mom,” I say and smile. My new friends are in for a treat they will never forget. 

