

I WANT TO GO TO KURACHEK

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Near a little village on the rocky coast of a faraway sea lived a young man named Fedor. He had a good wife and a fine son. He tended his vineyard, and his wife raised chickens. Life passed for them with good times and sorrows gently blended together. They had more friends than enemies, less pain than pleasure. In short, they were contented.

One day while Fedor was taking his grapes to market, a stranger passed along the road. Heartily, Fedor hailed him. "Where are you going, my good man?"

The stranger's eyes gleamed. His cheeks were hotly flushed. "I am on my way to Kurachek, to that strange and wonderful city!" He scarcely paused and then was off again with long, impatient strides.

"Wait, my good man!" called Fedor. "Tell me, where is Kurachek? What is to be seen there? And why do you hurry so?"

The stranger flashed a smile. "Kurachek," he said, "is the only place to be. Imagine sights as stirring as music and sounds as sparkling as stars! Think of dreams within dreams and golden delights! Think of all this and much more, and then you will know why I hasten to Kurachek."

Without another word the stranger disappeared, and Fedor sank into brooding.

"Kurachek," he murmured as he walked to the market.

"Kurachek," he sighed, making his way home again.

"Kurachek!" he cried out that night in his dreams.

His longing became so great that Fedor could think of nothing else. At last he told his wife, "I want to go to Kurachek, to that strange and wonderful city."

His wife sighed a great deal and wept a little. Finally she took Fedor's hand. "Go if you must," she said, "for I love you too well to deny you."

Fedor danced with happiness. Then he set out for the village to ask the miller and the butcher and the blacksmith and the tailor, "Have you heard of Kurachek? Do you know of Kurachek? Can you tell me how to get there?"

The miller raised his hands, white with flour. "I've heard of a place called Kurachek,

where nobody works past midday. The loaves they bake there are as white as snow and delectably delicious. But alas, my friend, I don't know how to get there."

The butcher held his blade stock still. His eyes were dazed with dreaming. "I've heard men talk of Kurachek, the queen of all cities. The animals there have silky coats and manes that curl and shimmer. But alas, my friend, I don't know how to get there."

The blacksmith quite forgot his forge. His eyes brightened. "I've heard that the fields of Kurachek are ablaze with flowers. The fruits on the trees hang ripe all year long. But alas, my friend, I don't know how to get there."

The tailor let his needle rest, and tears came to his eyes. "They say that the people of Kurachek are the cleverest in all the world. The men are strong, the women are kind, and the babies are always smiling. But alas, my friend, I don't know how to get there."

Fedor went home sadly. Far into the night, Fedor and his wife talked and thought; they pondered and they puzzled. Who would know how to get to Kurachek? At last Fedor's wife said, "You must go see Father Crocodile. He knows the ways of the world and its people. Surely he will know the way to Kurachek."

Fedor sang out with happiness. Of course Father Crocodile would help him. And tired as he was, Fedor set out at once to see him.

Father Crocodile lived across the cape in a small house dug into a hillside. He was a wise old man who understood that today's truth may be tomorrow's foolishness, and he was always smiling. That was how he got his name.

By the time Fedor arrived at Father Crocodile's door, it was morning. Smiling, Father Crocodile showed Fedor inside. Smiling still, he listened while Fedor spoke of Kurachek and asked how he could get there.

Father Crocodile paced the floor. He scratched his head. He sat down again and nodded. "I know the way to Kurachek," he said. "And I will tell you how to get there. But first you must prepare yourself."

Fedor held his breath as he listened.

"The great golden gates of Kurachek are tightly locked," said Father Crocodile. "But for men of wisdom, they will spread wide. When you approach the gates of Kurachek, you will be asked four questions."

"I will learn the answers!" exclaimed Fedor. "Teach me, and I will remember."

"You must learn the answers for yourself," replied Father Crocodile, "by doing exactly as I tell you. It will take you four days. On the fifth day you shall return to me, and then I will tell you the way to Kurachek.

"Tomorrow," said Father Crocodile, "you must spend the whole day in your

vineyard. You must study the soil, the grasses, the vines, the insects and birds, and all that surrounds you. For when you get to Kurachek, they will ask you this question: What sort of land do you come from? What can you tell us of it?"

"On the second day," continued Father Crocodile, "you must remain in the fields from dawn until dark and study the sky. Observe the clouds, the sun, the moon and stars. For when you get to Kurachek, they will ask you this question: What is the nature of the sky in your land? What can you tell us of it?"

"The third day," continued Father Crocodile, "you must go to the village and visit the miller, the butcher, the blacksmith, and the tailor. You must share the weight of their labors and understand their skills. Learn their thoughts and their hopes. For when you get to Kurachek, you will be asked this question: What is the nature of the people in your land? What can you tell us of them?"

"On the last day," said Father Crocodile, "you must stay home alone. You must think with all your might about yourself. For when you get to Kurachek, they will ask you this question: What sort of person are you? What can you tell us about yourself?"

"Is that all?" asked Fedor.

Smiling, Father Crocodile nodded.

"Such easy tasks!" exclaimed Fedor happily, and he whistled all the way home.

The four days passed quickly, and on the fifth day Fedor made his way back to the home of Father Crocodile. He knocked softly on the door, then entered and stood shyly before Father Crocodile.

Father Crocodile smiled and asked, "Have you done exactly as I told you?"

"Yes," said Fedor.

"Then," said Father Crocodile, "I will tell you the way to Kurachek."

"One moment!" cried Fedor, fumbling with the cap in his hands. "I—I'm not sure I really want to go to Kurachek."

"What?" exclaimed Father Crocodile. "Not sure, you say? But why not?"

Fedor sighed and said, "I did all that you told me, Father Crocodile. For one whole day in my vineyard, I examined everything with complete attention. I studied the grasses, the soil, the insects and birds. But my little vineyard is filled with so many wonders! I could not even begin to understand the land."

"But then," said Father Crocodile, "you must have learned about the sky."

Fedor said, "All day and half the night I studied the clouds, sun, moon, and stars. But the sky is vast and filled with mysteries. In truth, I cannot even begin to explain the nature of the heavens."

"But then," said Father Crocodile, "you must know all about your friends the miller, the butcher, the blacksmith, and the tailor."

"All day I worked with them," said Fedor. "I shared their laughter and their

labors. We spoke of our many hopes and dreams and thoughts. But people change and grow from day to day. How could I ever know them completely?”

“Then surely,” said Father Crocodile, “you must know about yourself. Of all things in the world, you know yourself best.”

Fedor was silent for a long moment. Then he said, “Myself I know least of all. Of myself I have the most to learn.”

Fedor lifted his head and said firmly, “No, Father Crocodile, I cannot go to Kurachek. I am far too busy. I really do not want to go to Kurachek.”

“Then go home in peace,” said Father Crocodile, smiling broadly.

Fedor smiled, too; a gentle smile that showed the beginning of wisdom.

As the years passed, Fedor’s smile grew ever broader, and he became known lovingly by one and all as Father Fedor. Although he lived to be very, very old, never again did he speak of Kurachek. In fact, if anybody mentioned Kurachek, Fedor only smiled.