

A conversation with little Míla

I HAVE ALREADY BEEN HELD FOUR MONTHS IN CUSTODY WHILE under investigation and have still not confessed what I did with my little nephew — the four-year-old Míla Klognerů.

I am afraid that if I were once to say exactly where I left him, I would not be rid of him, after they had found him. I know that his first words would be “Why are you sitting here?” That unfortunate way of his of saying “Why?”

More than four months ago his parents promised him that his uncle, that is to say me, would take him for a walk. Like it or not, I had to take him, after having promised his unfortunate parents that I would bring that clever little boy back again safe and sound.

And so I said to him at once, as soon as we left the house, “Now hold my hand, so that nothing happens to you.” And at once that clever child surprised me with the question, “Why mustn’t anything happen to me?” “You know, my dear little Míla, they might run over you.” “But why should they specially run over me? Why shouldn’t they run over you?” “You’re still small.” “But why am I small?” “Because you’re only four.” “And why am I only four?” “Because you’re not five.” “And if I was five?” “Then you’d be a year older.” “What’s older?” “Look, that lady over there is older than you.” “Why do you say that lady over there, Uncle?” “Because darling, I don’t mean this one here who’s just coming towards us.” “What do you mean by this one here?” “Now, dear little Míla, be a good boy and keep quiet.” “Why must I be a good boy and keep quiet?”

I gave him a box on the ears.

The boy burst into tears and so I said to him, "Now don't cry." He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and asked me innocently, "Why mustn't I cry?" "Because you're a man." "And why am I a man?" "Because you're not a little girl." "Why aren't I a little girl?" "Because, dear child, you wear trousers. As to the rest, you'll know about it when you're older." "But you wear trousers too, don't you, Uncle?" "Of course, you can see I do, dear little Mīla!" "Then, Uncle, why aren't you a little boy like me too?" "Because I've grown up." "Shall I grow up too?" "You'll grow up too, and now shut your mug." "Why must I shut my mug?" "Because if you don't I'll chuck you in the river." "But that'd be fun, Uncle." Now it was my turn to ask him, "And why would you think it fun, dear little Mīla?" "Because I'd be a little steamer." "And how would you be a steamer?" "I'd blow out steam, Uncle, and people would climb on to me and they'd ring. I'd be the steamer *Chuchle* and spit out fire."

Suddenly his attention was caught by a man who was watering the road. "Why is that man watering the street?" "He's washing off the dust." "And why doesn't he spray us?" "Because he mustn't." "Why mustn't he?" "Because he'd spoil our clothes." "How would he spoil our clothes?" "With the water, sonny." "And why with the water?" "Because he's watering the street with water and not with beer." "And why doesn't he water it with beer?" "Because he'd get drunk." "And why would he get drunk? You get drunk too, Uncle. That's what Mama says. Why are you a pig, Uncle?" "You don't understand these things, my dear little Mīla. Now keep quite, or I'll spank you." "And why will you spank me?" "Because you're calling me names." "And why shouldn't I call you names? At home they call you names too." "But that's not nice of them." "It isn't very nice of you either, Uncle."

I gave him another box on the ears. He didn't blink and said, "You see, I mustn't cry. You don't cry either, when Auntie hits you. Why does she hit you?" I gave him a spank on the behind. He was quiet and then, for no apparent reason, he called out, "Why don't these houses here have a door at the back. Why do they have it just here?" "Because otherwise no one could get in." "And why

should they have to get in?" "Because they live there." "And why do they live there?" "Because they have to." "And why do they have to?" "Because they don't want to sleep in the street." "And why don't they want to sleep in the street?" "Because they are orderly people."

He was silent and then said, "But you don't live here, Uncle." After that there followed a whole series of questions: Why is a tree called a tree? Why does that tree have branches on the top? Could bubbles be made out of the tree? Why does a bubble burst? Why do I look like a bubble when I burst (which he accompanied with the request that I should burst round the next corner)?

When we saw a dog, he asked why it wasn't a cat (another box on the ears). A long pause, during which new questions were taking shape inside his little head. "Why, Uncle, don't they make doughnuts out of a guardian angel?" "Why am I in a sweat?" "Why, when you're hot don't you hang out your tongue, Uncle, like a dog?" "Why aren't you a dog and why are you an elephant?" "Why do you have a trunk, Uncle?"

We walked past the station. I said to him in despair, "Wouldn't you like to go to Hungary?" "Why should I want to go to Hungary, Uncle?" "Because I'll buy you a ticket and we'll go there together. You know, on a puff-puff." He clapped his hands and called out, "I'll puff too." "Puff away, little boy." "I'll let off steam." "Do what you like, little Míla." And I bought two tickets for Puszta Magyarád, in the direction of Füzes-Gyarmat, the last station in the middle of the boundless *puszta*. Let me add that that clever child kept on asking all the time, "When shall we get there? When are you going to abandon me?"

Finally it happened. We walked out of the station of Puszta Magyarád into the middle of the *puszta* — it took us more than a day and a half — and there in the middle of it I told Míla to wait for me. "Why must I wait, Uncle?" "Because you're such a bright little boy." And I disappeared quickly. Behind me I heard his innocent little voice asking, "Why are you running away, Uncle?" And a moment later, "Why are the ants stinging me, Uncle?" . . .

And that is my confession.