

Green Olives Dipped in

BY RICK GRANT

Past the edges of the infinite universe, lies a region that does not exist. Nothing happens there; it cannot because the region is not there. And yet, there came a time when two were talking.

The conversation was both infinite and instantaneous in length. It happened before the birth of the universe, and after it. There was no way to judge.

"ARMACEL' I HAVE A JOB FOR YOU."

Armacel answered. He was nowhere near the speaker, but then he was nowhere else either.

"YES, A JOB WOULD BE WELCOME. THINGS HAVE BEEN A LITTLE QUIET LATELY."

"I THINK IT IS TIME FOR ME TO HAVE A SON."

"YOU ALREADY HAVE ONE. WHAT'S THE POINT OF ANOTHER?"

"APART FROM THE FACT THERE SHOULD'T BE ANY REASON FOR ME NOT TO HAVE ANOTHER. I FEEL THAT THE SAME WORLD WHERE THE OTHER WAS BORN COULD BENEFIT FROM A REPEAT."

"YES THEY CERTAINLY TOOK THE FIRST THE WRONG WAY, BUT AREN'T YOU IN DANGER OF CONFUSING THEM? AFTER ALL, QUITE A FEW ARE EXPECTING A SECOND COMING OR EVEN STILL WAITING FOR THE FIRST. A THING LIKE THIS WOULD CONFUSE THEM EASILY."

"THAT IS WHY I HAVE SENT FOR YOU. I DON'T WANT ANY OF THAT EMOTIONAL PROPOGANDA WE INDULGED IN LAST TIME. THERE ARE TO BE NO MIRACULOUS HAPPENINGS OR ANGELS SINGING. JUST A PLAIN ORDINARY BIRTH TO AN ORDINARY, THE BOY IS TO HAVE MUCH THE SAME LIFE AS THE FIRST. IT IS GOOD TRAINING."

"YOU MEAN WE LET HIM GO THROUGH THE POGROMS AND PERSECUTION THAT THE FIRST WENT THROUGH?"

"NO, THAT WAS AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT SITUATION. THERE ARE TO BE NO DRAMATICS, OR INCIDENTS THAT VIOLATE THEIR PHYSICAL UNIVERSE."

"THERE IS TO BE NOTHING TO ANNOUNCE HIS BIRTH. ISN'T THAT A LITTLE UNFAIR TO THEM AFTER ALL THEY LOVE PAGENTRY. IF THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO BENEFIT BY THIS, THEY SHOULD HAVE SOMETHING TO IDENTIFY HIM BY."

"YOU ARE RIGHT. THEY DO NEED A SIGN. I CAN SEE THEY HAVE AN INTENSE FEAR OF FALSE PROPHETS. I DON'T WANT THEM THINKING THIS IS ONE. AS FOR THE SECOND COMING, AS THEY CALL IT, WE'LL MAKE SURE THEY DON'T EVEN CONSIDER IT AS SUCH. WE ALREADY HAVE THAT ORGANISED FOR THE FUTURE AND I DON'T WANT THINGS MESSED UP."

"RIGHT. WE'LL USE THE ADVANCED WARNING TECHNIQUE AND MAYBE THROW IN THE SHINING STAR."

"YOU MIGHT AS WELL MAKE USE OF THOSE BRIGHT YOUNG ASSISTANTS FOR THE DETAILS AND I'LL LOOK AFTER THE REST."

"IS THE BOY TO KNOW WHO HE IS? WHAT ABOUT THE PARENTS?"

"NO. THE WHOLE THING IS TO BE KEPT FROM THEM. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF HIS BIRTH, EVERYTHING IS TO APPEAR NORMAL. HE'LL STAND ON HIS OWN AND MAKE HIS OWN PHILOSOPHY BUT HE WILL HAVE THE ADVANTAGE OF KNOWING THE TRUTH. WE DO NOT WANT A REPITITION OF THE HYSTERIA WE HAD LAST TIME."

The winter was well into its stride, the constant west wind pushed fine dry snow deep into the country, drowning the small towns with its blanket. Deep in the center of the flat country, next to a narrow meandering river, sat a small town like any other. Just a collection of old worn wooden houses, crowding close to its own center where the main street formed a focal-point for the small businesses.

Towards the edge of town, off the main street, sat a house, meaner than any other. It was small and old, a sagging covered porch ran across the front, the windows were uncurtained and dirty. No lights showed during the nights because the residents could not afford the luxury. For warmth, they depended on a decrepit piece of iron that ran off coal oil and frequently broke down.

The couple living in the house were newly married, and very poor. The husband, because of his youth and inexperience, was out of work and had little prospect of finding one in the small town or the surrounding area. His wife was younger than him and had never had a job of any kind, her education had halted at the tenth grade when they married.

Although the government paid him a small living allowance and looked after his basic requirements, it was insufficient when it came to allowing him to learn a new trade or even to let him buy some new clothes so he could try to make an impression with a prospective

employer.

For the last few days he had been lucky enough to be employed clearing the sidewalks of the town after the heavy snowfalls.

He knew it would not last, nevertheless the job brought in enough money for them to afford a good meal that one night for a change.

She served the food to him at the plain wooden table, bare of a tablecloth or any other luxury, then seated herself across from him.

She picked listlessly at her food while he eagerly wolfed down the rare fruit of his labours. At times through the meal she lifted her head, as if to say something, but seemed to think better of it.

He was too tired and hungry to notice her preoccupation. It was not until after the meal and he had lit one of his few remaining cigarettes that he became aware of her.

He looked over at his young wife for the first time that night since he had sat down and saw with a shock how upset she was. Their short married life had been hard, short of the many things other married couples took for granted, but they had never lacked for love and understood one another with an easy tenderness.

The look on her face wiped the tiredness from his face to be replaced by a look of honest concern.

"What's the matter love?"

"Oh...I...I don't know how to tell you..." she said haltingly before bursting into tears.

Instantly he was on his feet and beside her. Anxiously, he cradled her sobbing body in his arms.

"What's the matter dear? You can tell me," he said in a soft voice.

She sobbed softly for a few seconds before answering.

"Darling...I...We are going to have a baby. I didn't want to tell you before, I thought it would make things harder than they are."

"O darling that's wonderful, beautiful, I can't tell you how much it makes me happy."

She saw the look of happiness on his face and smiled weakly at him.

"How long have you known?" he said.

"About four months," she replied in a scared voice.

"Four months! But there wasn't any reason to keep it so secret."

She burst into tears again before speaking. "Dear, things have been so bad for you I didn't want to upset you. I know it was silly of me but I could never get around to telling you."

"That's alright little girl. Don't worry about it. We'll move to the city and I'll get a job and everything will be all right."

The next few weeks before Christmas and the birth of the child saw him working at any and every job he could lay his hands on. He shoveled sidewalks, cleaned barns, herded cattle to shelter, and worked at all the small dirty jobs no one would do in a desperate attempt to gather some money together for the move to the city.

As her pregnancy advanced, she demanded more and more of his time until he was living on a fine line close to breakdown from lack of sleep and little food. Her welfare came before his and he spared no sacrifice for her well-being.

The baby was due for the Christmas week. He intended to have her in the city for the confinement so she could have the benefit of professional medical help. The child was important to him. In his mind the child and the mother were the same person. They came first in his life, there was nothing he would not do for them.

Three days before Christmas it became apparent that her time was close. He loaded their old pick-up truck with their few personal belongings and furniture. The truck was old and in need of repair, he doubted if it would last them the several hundred miles into the city.

The next day they said goodbye to their friends and left the house where they had lived since they were married. Although it was a crude and rundown place, they were heartbroken at having to leave and promised themselves they would return to the town someday and repair the house.

He started the truck with difficulty, it had been lying idle for months in the cold, and headed out of the town along the main street.

