

## NOT VIRGIN MARY

Feby Indirani

Maria is pregnant. Without sleeping with anyone and outside of wedlock.

When she finds out about it, she is terrified. It was the year 2016. No one believed in miracles like the Virgin Mary anymore. All of that ended when Jesus was born without a father, centuries ago. Today, who would believe that Maria could get pregnant without having an intercourse with a man.

Especially since Maria is not a virgin.

Maria herself is convinced that her pregnancy has happened miraculously, without the touch of any man. But who would believe that? Her everyday life is no different from any average big city dweller. She doesn't spend her days behind a mosque wall like chaste, virginal Mary, in prostration and worship. Maria is just a normal woman living her life, working in an office of a private company. She moonlights as a model for a men's magazine, which means she is used to posing in front of the camera with her clothes off, although she has set her own limits, which poses she would do and how far she would go.

She unwinds by sipping coffee with her friends, or going out of town for the weekend, or making love with her boyfriend, when she has one. But now, when she has been alone for a while, something suddenly comes alive and grows in her womb. And she didn't even realize it until she was three months pregnant. She knows she hadn't bled, but those first two months she just thought that maybe she was exhausted, or stressed out, or some other reason. When her stomach begins to harden in the third month, then she begins to panic, buying every brand of test pack, diligently peeing on each one, only to find that they all show positive results. She is pregnant.

At first, she stops talking. But after a night in silence, thinking and crying, she can't bear the burden alone anymore, and she contacts Saskia, her closest friend since high school. When Saskia arrives, Maria is lying in bed, in one of those exclusive rented rooms which calls itself a residence, to show that it is not some run-of-the-mill rental.

"Who's the father?"

Maria shakes her head. "I swear to God, there is none."

"Yeah, no way..."

Maria shuts her eyes. "But there really isn't one."

"Try and remember. Did you ever get drunk and pass out? Who knows, maybe you slept with someone, but you don't remember."

Maria shakes her head. "I never drink that much."

Saskia stares at her in disbelief.

"How long have you known me? Have I ever lied to you?"

"So, do you want to have an abortion?"

Maria lies down again and turns her body away from Saskia.

“Mar.”

“What if I’m carrying a prophet? Isn’t it said that at the end of time, Isa or Jesus will return to earth to save humankind? Signs that the end of time is getting close, don’t you know?”

“Yes, but that only happens if you behave like Mother Mary, who prayed devoutly, constantly communing with God and keeping herself away from any men. While you... Well, sorry but... you’re not like that...”

Maria is quiet again. “Yes, but I’m not really terrible.” she said, sounding offended. “I don’t take what’s not mine, I don’t take bribe. I work hard to support myself, even if I have to model for adult magazine. I pray, even though sometimes I miss a prayer time. I pay my taxes, I don’t litter, I wait in line. I don’t steal, I don’t infringe on the rights of others, and that includes not sleeping with married men...”

Saskia is silent. Confused. An uncomfortable silence follows. She doesn’t know how to react or what to say, this is too hard to believe.

“So...what are you going to do?”

Maria is quiet again. Her eyes are swollen as if she is tired of crying. Saskia holds her hand.

“Let’s just find a man who wants to marry you.”

“Yeah, who would want to?”

“Well, you haven’t tried yet.”

They begin to make a list of the men who are close to Maria or have been in the last two years, which seems like a sensible period of time. Longer than that and they might no longer have any ties to Maria, which means they would certainly refuse.

“Rama?”

“He just got together with someone else...”

“Ricky?”

“You know we have different religions. It’s complicated...”

“Ardan?”

“Ah, waste of time. He doesn’t like me!”

“Fahmi?”

“I’d rather die!”

“Oh Mar, come on! You are stuck. Just accept him!”

“Absolutely not. Anyone else is better”

Frustrated, Saskia frowns.

“Ah, what about Gilang? You two were close recently.”

“Gilang...um..he’s still married, Sas..”

“See? You said you don’t sleep with married men.”

Maria blushes. For the first time in the past few hours she smiles. “Well, not often...”

Saskia shakes her head, looking exasperated. “How are you going to convince people to believe you get pregnant without having sex with any man?”

“You mean you don’t believe me?”

“Well, anyone would have a hard time believing you.”

Maria was sullen again.

“But whether I believe you or not is not important. The most important thing now is what you have to do. Your stomach will keep on growing, and everyone will start asking questions. Here at this apartment, in the office, your friends, your family will also find out if you go home, you won’t be able to hide this much longer.”

“Yes...”

“So in my opinion you have two options, find a man who wants to marry you, or have an abortion as soon as possible.”

“Hmmm... neither of those options is very nice...”

“This is not a matter of nice or not nice, Mar... Come on.”

Saskia gets up from her seat, followed by Maria’s anxious gaze. She opens the refrigerator, pours two glasses of water, gives one to Maria and gulps down the other.

“Ok Fahmi it is. He’s your best shot,” Saskia says firmly.

Maria immediately shakes her head.

“Okay then if that’s how you feel, get an abortion...”

“Why does it have to be like that? Can’t I be an independent woman, have a child of my own, without having to get married to anyone? I have savings. It’ll be enough for me and my child.”

“Yes, but everybody will ask, whose child is it?”

“My child of course...”

“Yes, but who is the father?”

“There is none, I’m like the Virgin Mary. Her child became a prophet, who knows maybe my child will too!”

“You are crazy!”

“Yes, and you are even crazier telling me to kill my own child!”

Saskia flicks her hands. "Your child couldn't possibly be a prophet. If you really didn't sleep with anyone, he may be the child of a spirit or a ghost. On the other hand, if you turned out to be lying, well, then he is just an illegitimate child!"

"And you still don't believe that I get pregnant without any man's contribution. Okay, never mind. I thought you were my one and only friend, the one and only person in the world who could believe in me!"

"It makes no difference whether I believe you or not. The fact is, I also can't help you because you are stubborn and you don't want to follow my advice. And yes, in case you are wondering, I really don't believe you!"

"Well in that case, then why are you still here?" challenged Maria.

Without another word, Saskia walks out, leaving Maria alone. And Maria knows that at that moment she is truly alone. It is just the two of them, she and her baby. No one will ever believe her. Everyone will accuse her of adultery.

But, she thinks, what the hell! This is my child. This is my life. And this is 2016.

It isn't unusual to be a single mother in 2016. She lives in a place where the majority were Muslims, but she is lucky because she will not be caned for committing adultery. But still, she has to think hard about hiding her pregnancy from her family. She also has to prepare more money for her delivery, and she will have to prepare a safe place to hide when as she grew bigger. Then she will have to think about where they will live, she and the baby after its birth. Suddenly her head begin to ache from too many thoughts bombarding her at once.

Maria spends the next days alone trying to be strong. She returns to her office as usual, acting as if nothing had changed. She wears loose clothes, but no one was suspicious. When she is in her fifth month, people say that she has filled out or gained weight, but at the same time she looks prettier. Maria, as usual, smiles as if she didn't have a worry in the world, although at night she often cries. She turns modelling gigs because her pregnancy will become immediately obvious when she wears skimpy clothes and bares her midriff.

Her parents who live in another city even come to visit her. Maria bravely covers everything up, with various styles of clothing and jokes about how much she loves to eat these days. Her parents seem to be happy with her rounded cheeks and glowing skin. Even Maria is surprised at how smoothly everything goes until she is seven months pregnant.

Then, it becomes more difficult to hide her pregnancy. No matter how loose her clothes are, her rounded stomach will still show. But she still looks calm and composed, as if nothing is any different. Maria is aware that people are beginning to talk about her, staring at her full of curiosity or directing their frowns at her. Everyone knows she isn't married yet. But is this really anybody's business?

The braver ones among her colleagues finally ask her directly. Maria has decided to tell the truth, whatever the consequences. Then comments begin coming at heart her without mercy.

"You're crazy! Do you think you're Mother Mary? Just because you have the same name, don't even dream about it!"

“You should be ashamed to compare yourself with the Virgin Mary? You, model for an X-rated men’s magazine!”

“It’s 2016. A girl being pregnant without a husband isn’t so strange. If you would just be honest about it, we’ll help you hunt the guy so he’ll take responsibility!”

Rumours about her pregnancy keeps circulating, along with bizarre assumptions about Maria. She doesn’t know who is responsible, but her family in another city finally find out about Maria’s pregnancy, and not only that, they also learned about her side job as a model for an adult men’s magazine. It was as if someone has exposed all of that to embarrass Maria and her family. Maria is called home, just when her due date was just a matter of time. Her arrival created an uproar among her neighbours and old friends. Maria is pregnant without a husband, and she is willing to swear that her pregnancy is not because of any man.

“Who is he, child?” ask her mother and father in tears.

Maria stays silent. She gives her parents a letter, in which she begs their forgiveness and acknowledged that she is pregnant without relations with any man. Also that she is tired and does not want to talk until the baby was born.

In the middle of a scorching day, exactly after nine months and nine days, Maria gives birth to a baby. It was a girl. The news somehow spreads quickly to her friends. Everyone makes sarcastic comments. If she is the Virgin Mary, why hadn’t she given birth to the Prophet? Why hadn’t she given birth to a messiah?

But Maria doesn’t care; she stretches out, busy nursing her baby.

The baby girl looks into her eyes and speaks. “Mother, I almost was not born, for too long this world has stopped believing...”

Maria hugs her baby. “But, I believe, My Child...” ’

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Feby Indirani, "Not Virgin Mary" from *Not Virgin Mary* (2017)

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