

I know. And I *feel* ragged too. It should have been so easy: nice well-brought-up young lady, soft as butter, bring her the good news, she's bound to say yes, come straight back.

So I materialise, just a little bit so that she realises I'm not a burglar.

"What – who are you?" she snaps. "What d'you think you're doing?"

"Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee," I say, following the script like I'm supposed to, and of course I expected her to be overcome with wonder and astonishment – she's a teenage girl, after all.

"And I'm with the Queen of Sheba," she snaps. "Get out!"

She's pointing a stool at me, and those legs look hard. Painful.

"Blessed art thou among women!"

"Are you deaf or something? I said get out NOW before I call my parents!" and she stabs the stool at me.

I jump back.

"Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God!"

"Ten, nine, eight..."

I'm aware – very aware – that my voice is getting faster – a lot faster. I try thickening up a bit more. "A-and, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus!"

"Six, five, four..."

"He shall be great!" OK, I'm panicking now – I can hear my voice beginning to squeak, "and shall be called the Son of the Highest and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever and of his kingdom there shall be no end." I was really rattling out the words by the finish. Not exactly the image I'd intended.

There's a pause. She stares at me.

"OK, so when? Obviously not till after I'm married, but how long after? And does Joseph know he's getting a special kid?"

Phew – she's listening at last! "Oh – er – no, it won't be Joseph's, so – er – and it's sort of – er – now – er –" I pulled myself together, and tried to get back on script. "Er – where was I – oh yes – er – The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible."

She's still staring at me. I'm trying to avoid that stare – to look everywhere else – well, mostly at that stool. Then she tilts her head.

"So I'm going to have a kid? Now? When I'm still a virgin? Really? And I explain this to Mum and Dad exactly how? And to Joseph?"

At least she'd let the stool droop a bit.

"Oh, well, I-I've not been officially told, but I did hear, I mean, there's a story going round that, well, your parents already know. Or have guessed. Or will guess. Or something. Anyway, they're sorted somehow. And Joseph – he'll be sorted too – no worries. Honest. It just needs your say-so." I suddenly wasn't as sure as I had been that I was getting that. "Or not, of course."

There was a long pause. A very long pause. A very very long pause. Mary's staring at me, steady as a rock.

Then, "OK," she says, "let's go for it. Oh, there's a proper phrase, isn't there – er – 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.' That good enough? Fine. So you've got what you wanted; get out. Now."

Yes. I feel ragged. All right? And now – now you're asking me to go back and talk to her *again*? About escaping to Egypt? No way. No no no. I'll talk to Joseph if you like – he seems a cooperative enough bloke – but Mary? No. Never again.