

MARVEL TALES



“LATE SPRING”

A MS. MARVEL STORY BY G. WILLOW WILSON

Longtime MS. MARVEL writer and one of the co-creators of Kamala Khan, G. Willow Wilson has penned an all-new prose story starring the Jersey City Super Hero in solidarity and celebration of essential workers everywhere. Presented with art by Nico Leon, colors by Ian Herring, and letters VC's Joe Sabino.

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The funny thing about springtime is that it happens even when you're not looking. There's this dogwood tree in Mrs. Petrakis's back yard, across the fence from us, that's bloomed every April for as long as I can remember, and every year it's a little bit taller. You don't notice when it's doing the actual growing. One day it's barely over your head, and the next it's reached the second floor windowsills, and then somehow, like magic, it's filled up half the sky. This year I can almost touch it when I lean out my bedroom window, yet I never noticed the in-between bits when it was getting bigger. Most of the really important things in life seem to happen while you're looking the other way.

I was sitting in my window looking at the dogwood tree when Abu called me from downstairs. I sort of half-fell into my room when I heard his voice, because I was technically supposed to be videoconferencing with my Trigonometry class, but I fixed it so that my laptop plays a clip of me frowning and taking studious notes on a two-minute loop, so I wasn't so much *present* as four feet away. I don't think my Trigonometry teacher has figured it out yet, but since Stark Enterprises set all the students at Coles Academic up with fancy maglev cameras that float on your desk and auto-adjust depending on where you're standing and are 100% full of spyware, I *did* get a text from Tony that said *Haha very funny, now go to class*. But what is he really going to do about it? He's quarantining on a yacht or something.

Anyway, when I heard Abu calling my name, I scrambled downstairs, grabbing my Trigonometry notebook on the way in case Tony had somehow *also* managed to text my dad and snitch on me. But Abu didn't even ask to see my Trig notes; instead he frowned and puffed out his cheeks in a way he only does when he's Very Concerned about something.

"Beta," he began, "I'm very concerned about Mrs. Petrakis next door. You know her son is all the way in Connecticut and can't visit until all this is over, and she shouldn't be going out to the supermarket on her own, at her age, with the situation being what it is..." He trailed off, but I understood where this was going. Since my brother Aamir and his wife are quarantining at their apartment with the baby, I have become the default eldest child, the one entrusted with responsibilities, the one whose opinions are actually taken seriously, the one who does what must be done.

I have been waiting years for this moment.

"I'll go next door and ask her what she needs," I said, already peeling off my indoor shoes so I could put on my outdoor shoes.

"Wait!" called Abu. "Your mask!"

I froze where I was for a full minute (maybe it was more like a few seconds) and thought *This is it. He's found out. I should never have left my costume in my laundry hamper*. But Abu was holding up one of the cloth masks Ammi has been sewing obsessively since this whole thing began. She's made them for practically everybody on our block. She even made a TikTok tutorial and went semi-viral for like three days, and now she casually drops her view count into random conversations. This is what I get for showing her how to use the internet.

I took the mask and the bottle of hand sanitizer and the back-up bottle of aftershave, which Abu swears works just as well, and headed out the door. The air was like a freshly-opened can of orange soda: sweet and clear and tingly. I felt this wave of—I don't even know what to call it, sadness maybe, because ordinarily I would spend most of this part of the year outside. At school we'd eat lunch on the steps, in the sunshine, and at the Circle Q Bruno would keep the door open and make 'special' Smushees from all the different syrup flavors mixed together, which tastes exactly as terrible as you imagine. And at night I'd go on patrol and the city would smell like fresh-cut grass.

Mrs. Petrakis answered the door after the second knock.

"Why, could this be little Kamala?" she said with exaggerated surprise. She knows it's me, even with the mask on; this is just her way of making me feel bad for failing to visit her in ages.

"Hi, Mrs. Petrakis," I said from the very edge of the porch. "My dad sent me to ask you if you need anything from the grocery store."

"I don't want you to go out of your way," said Mrs. Petrakis, but I could tell she was happy to be asked.

"I'm going anyway," I lied. "It's really no problem."

"Well, if you're sure..." she ducked back inside for a minute and re-emerged with a sheet of notebook paper that was, without exaggeration, filled from margin to margin. I swallowed nervously.

"If you can't find the maraschino cherries, don't worry about it," said Mrs. Petrakis. "The maraschinos are optional." She set the list down on the porch. I wondered if I should wait until she went back inside to pick it up. Nobody knows what the protocols are supposed to be. Everything is confusing.

"I'll just leave the grocery bags on the porch when I get back," I told Mrs. Petrakis. "And ring the doorbell to let you know they're here."

"Thank you, sweet girl," she crooned, and flashed a movie-star smile. There's a picture of her in her living room that she showed me once, grainy and faded, taken when she was about my age and still living in Athens. The same glamorous smile. I wonder if all of the twists of fate that brought her here to Grove Street prepared her for the bizarre new world we live in now, or whether it took her by surprise like everyone else.

The grocery store near the PATH station was crowded, and people stood in line outside while they waited for it to clear out. I had just started listening to a playlist that Carol sent me (and which I'm pretty sure she listens to at the gym, because it was all get-pumped hard rock stuff that frankly gives me an anxiety attack) when a text popped up on my phone. It was Bruno. *Something weird going on at Coles Street Pothole*, he wrote. *Don't know if actual villains or just sewer alligators.*

Sweat broke out on my upper lip. There were still two people ahead of me in line. I looked at the epic grocery list in my hand and felt a familiar kind of panic: who needed me more? How was I supposed to decide? And then I did what I always do: convinced myself I could be in two places at once, no problem.

The clerk standing at the entrance of the store in a jury-rigged hazmat suit finally waved me inside. I ran down the center aisle with Mrs. Petrakis's grocery list between my teeth. Canned corn. Two kinds of cheese with lots of consonants in them. Broad beans. Wait, canned broad beans or dried broad beans? I grabbed a can of foul mudammas because it was near my elbow. As I worked my way from aisle to aisle, I realized I was going to end up with a lot more than I could carry back to Mrs. Petrakis's house—unless I embiggened myself, which, in broad daylight and having conveniently left my costume at home, seemed risky. I decided to think about that part later.

Finally I had everything. Everything except the maraschino cherries. Even though Mrs. Petrakis had said they were optional, I felt obligated to at least *look*, because when everything is terrible, maraschino cherries seem like a good thing to have around. Emergency maraschino cherries. I lugged my extremely full basket up one aisle and down another. Chocolate, pasta, flour; short, medium and long-grained rice; black olives, green olives, but no maraschino cherries.

My phone buzzed again. I didn't look at it. I didn't look at it because I was looking at Josh Richardson, aka Discord, a former friend-since-elementary-school who at some point decided, for reasons I still don't totally understand, that he was my arch-nemesis. I had no idea he was in Jersey City as opposed to in jail or locked up by the Avengers or possibly even dead. So I stood there, staring at his familiar blond profile, and gradually realized that right in front of him, just behind the packet of chili paste he was scrutinizing, was exactly one jar of maraschino cherries.

He must have felt me staring. He looked up, and seemed as startled to see me as I was to see him. In moments like this, you have to claim the high ground. Put yourself in the best possible position for the coming battle. So I squared my shoulders, and said in the most threatening tone I could manage, "Hand me that jar of cherries."

Josh went pale. His lip trembled.

"Can't," he said stiffly. "Social distancing." It seemed like he wanted to say something else, but stopped himself.

"Well get out of the way then," I demanded. He flushed and backed down the aisle, his head bent. With as much dignity as I could manage, I shuffled toward him with my massive basket clutched awkwardly against my ribs, and took the last jar of maraschino cherries from the shelf. I felt like I needed to fire off a parting line, something that would sting, something that would leave him questioning his life choices.

"Thanks," I said.

"No problem," he muttered.

I paid for my stuff as fast as I could manage and left. My phone buzzed a third time. There's a back way from the PATH station that leads through a series of alleys, along the crowded, shuttered back entrances of shops and apartment buildings, where even at this hour of the afternoon, I could probably sneak by unseen. So I ducked off of Grove Street and slipped into the narrow alley running parallel to it, and embiggened until I was about seven feet tall.

Things look different from up here. Clearer. Less like a series of catastrophes. I took a deep breath and began to feel better. Who cares if Josh was back in Jersey City? Who cares if something dubious was going down at Coles Street Pothole *again*? I can handle things. I always have before.

It was about then that my giant foot caught on the edge of a storm drain and the bags of groceries I was carrying under each arm flew into the air.

Instinctively, I tucked my shoulder and went into a forward roll. As soon as I was rightside-up again, I stretched out my arm, made my hand as massive as I could—and watched with a sigh of relief as the grocery bags tumbled into it, more or less intact. Except for one thing. A red glimmer continued flying through the air, end over end, toward the uneven pavement below. It was, of course, the bottle of maraschino cherries. What else would it be.

I stretched out my foot. I prayed. I thought of all the things we could have done differently, things we could have done to prepare, that would have made it so that my entire life didn't hang on *one bottle of maraschino cherries*. I knew on a basic intellectual level that the cherries weren't really a big deal. Yet somehow, I couldn't make myself *believe* it. I guess when you can't fix the big things, the small things take on outsized importance.

I couldn't look. I squeezed my eyes shut. There was a thud. I compromised and opened one eye. There was the bottle of cherries balanced on my foot.

By the time I actually got back to Mrs. Petrakis's house, I was crying, and my phone had buzzed at least three more times. I set the grocery bags on her porch and decided not to worry about the fact that they looked like they'd been put through a blender, and began to slip away. But Mrs. Petrakis must have heard me sniffing, because she opened the door and stuck her head out with a concerned frown.

"Kamala!" she exclaimed, pressing a hand to her chest. "Whatever is the matter, my dear?"

I hastily dried my eyes with the hem of my STEVE ROGERS SUPERFAN teeshirt.

"I'm just—" I flailed my arms at nothing. "—Having a hard time coping with all this, that's all. I feel really unprepared, but I can't figure out how I *could* have been prepared."

Mrs. Petrakis sat down in her doorway and set her cup of coffee on the porch beside her.

"Do you want to know something?" she asked. "I'm eighty years old next month. I have seen many things, in many different places, and I've only just worked out that no matter how much you prepare, the biggest calamities in life will always catch you off guard."

She pronounced *calamities* like it was part of a spell. I discovered I'd stopped crying, and smiled.

"So then...how *do* you prepare?" I asked.

"Sometimes you can't," said Mrs. Petrakis, standing up slowly and wincing. "Sometimes you can only learn as you go." She smiled down at me. "Thank you for the groceries. Here—"

Reaching into one of the bags, she pulled out the jar of maraschino cherries.

"You keep these. They help. I don't know how, but they help." She set the jar on the porch and shuffled back inside. I stood there at the bottom of the stairs for a minute longer. A breeze kicked up and ruffled the blossoms on the dogwood tree behind the house. It, too, had caught me by surprise.