SHORT STORY

POTATO POTATO

by Jay C. Alexander



"Potato" by Hana Nekrep

Tint Journal, no. 16 (September 2026), www.tintjournal.com

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

Nancy knew we'd been growing in her pantry for weeks. It was the perfect home for us: damp, warm, and full of strange bacteria that helped us thrive in the chaos of her apartment. Even though she had taken us in to make nourishment — a stew or a simple puree — she stopped checking on us after the third day, and whenever she walked into the kitchen, we'd hear her pause, look around, curse us with a sigh, then walk away. Our sprouts had touched the pantry door by the second week. A moon cycle later, we finally snuck our way under the door and reached the kitchen tiles.

The small window in the small kitchen was completely covered by its small blinds. If we worked hard enough, we thought, we could get to the wall, sneak past the blinds, then get the sunlight we so needed. It'd only take another moon cycle or two, as long as Nancy didn't fix her apartment's air conditioner, making her place too cold for us. The kitchen would become our new home until then.

It was messier than the pantry, somehow. The dirty porcelain plates in the sink had been replaced by bags of disposable ones, what little cutlery Nancy owned, three plastic cups, a single pot reserved for boiling water, and whatever condiments she had collected from food deliveries. We could see her living room from the kitchen. It also worked as a bedroom, and a dining room, and a guest room, with a small bathroom attached opposite to the kitchen. Past the discarded clothes and boxes, Nancy lay on her old bed.

We could see her. She could see us. Nancy sighed, "Siri, remind me to get rid of the potatoes." Then she showed us her back.

A week passed before she even set foot in the kitchen again. We had spread to the counters by then, past the dishwasher and sink, still aiming for the sunlight nearby. Some of our sprouts had chosen to hide under the living room carpet and search for more warmth in Nancy's belongings. Her home was nice. It welcomed us like a friend.

"What the fuck," she whispered from the doorway.

Using plastic bags as gloves, she began pulling us away from the counters and the floors, dumping our sprouts into the trash. Opening the pantry door made her gag — we'd grown plenty of tubers and smaller roots, attaching ourselves to the wooden shelf, and the sight must've been disgusting to her. Still, she took a deep breath and threw our roots away. For her, it was worthy of celebration. For us, it was time for plan B. We continued moving under the carpet.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

Four days later, we settled under her bed, next to abandoned snacks and rotting clothes. The bed frame moved above us as she turned.

Her phone rang.

“Shit.”

After a few more seconds of ringing, the noise stopped and the mattress dipped.

“Laura?”

“Nance, hi!” said the voice coming from the phone’s speakers. “How’ve you been?”

“Good, yeah, good. You?”

“I’m good too, thanks for asking! I was actually wondering — well, I’ll be coming back to town soon, and I was wondering if you still had that extra room? If you don’t mind me staying there, of course.”

“Um.” Nancy coughed. “I moved, actually.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, a year ago.”

“Oh. So you’ve no extra rooms? I’ll take the couch if I have to.”

“No, no, you wouldn’t like my couch. Have you tried calling —”

“Cindy? She’s out of town.”

“Is she?”

“Yeah, month long trip to Japan. She didn’t tell you?”

“I hadn’t heard.”

“I thought you guys still talked.”

“We talk.”

Nancy stood up from the bed, walked over to one of the closed windows and opened the blinds, letting the sunshine hit her face. If only we could get to the light…

“You don’t know anyone else?”

“Not really,” said Laura. “I mean, I could find a room, but they’re gonna be expensive. Was hoping you’d help me.”

“I’d love to help you, but —”

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

“It’s not because of us, is it?”

“Not at all.”

“I’d be staying with you for only a few days. Strictly platonic.”

“It’s not because of that, Laura, I just have no space.”

“I’m sure you have some space. Please?”

“I really can’t.”

We slowly made our way across the floor. Sunlight was hitting the carpet right by Nancy’s bare feet, and if we managed to reach it…

“Okay. Okay, yeah, it’s fine, I’ll figure it out.”

Nancy winced. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s okay, really. I’ll still visit you, though. What’s your new address?”

“You don’t have to visit me.”

“I know you never leave your house, so I’ll take my beautiful ass over there. We can have lunch or something. Where’s your place?”

“I’ll go out with you.”

“Don’t lie, Nance. What’s the address?”

“It’s, uh… What the — ?”

We stopped once Nancy saw us. She stared at our sprouts in disbelief, still holding her phone in the air. Finally, she closed the blinds and kicked her foot at us, trying to push us away.

Laura’s voice made its way to us again. “What’s wrong?”

“No, I just saw something. I, uh…” Nancy kicked again. “You don’t gotta come. Just say a time and place.”

“What, like a date?”

“Not — Not a date, catching up.”

“We’ll pick a time and place, then the day will come, and you’ll call me saying you caught the flu.”

“I won’t.” Another kick. “I don’t get sick anymore.”

“Then your job will need you urgently.”

“I don’t go there anymore.”

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

“New job?”

“Still looking for one — *Stop.*”

Nancy grabbed a napkin and used it to pull us off the floor, yanking at our sprout until half of us wasn’t hiding anymore. We were taken into the small bathroom next.

“Listen, Laura, I gotta go. Just text me a time and place.”

“Okay. Okaaay. Does Cindy know where?”

She dumped us into the toilet as she distractedly answered, “Uh, yeah, why?”

“No reason,” Laura said. “See you!”

Fortunately, one of our sprouts had made its way into her mattress.

We watched as Nancy pulled box after box from the space under her bed. These boxes — some cardboard, others plastic — were overfilled with various mundane trinkets, yet she didn’t hesitate to dig through them to search for something specific. Not the chapsticks. Not the hairbands. Not the notebooks.

Two hours into her search, Nancy pulled a small black bracelet from the bottom of a box, with a silver astronaut and half-heart hanging from it. She held the astronaut close to her right eye and read to herself.

“I love you.” *I love you.* “Te amo.” *I love you.* “Je t’aime.” *I love you.* “Ti amo.” *I love you.* “Ich liebe dich.” *I love you.* “? ???? ?????.” *I love you.*

The other half of the heart was nowhere to be seen. She undid the bracelet and tied it around her left wrist, adjusting the astronaut until it was looking right at her.

“God, I hate you.”

Her mattress had gotten so old, growing through its layers was an easy job. Our sprouts — which had started turning into green leaves — tore through the final layer of the mattress and finally breathed fresh air, allowing us to take another look at Nancy’s apartment. It looked just as dark. Right as we were about to start moving away, she turned on the bed, pressing her head right against us.

“What — ?”

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

Her hand dug through her matted hair until she found our sprouts braided into it.

It'd be hard for us to describe the sound that came out of her throat. Nancy tried sitting up, quickly realizing we were fully tangled with her — and fully buried into her mattress — so she wasn't able to move too far. Desperate, she pulled at our sprouts until her brute strength freed us from the mattress. She ran into the attached bathroom and kneeled by the bathtub, her head right under the tap, so when she turned it on, the water began untangling us. It took a few pulls and a few snapped strands to detach our greens from her hair. What was left of us fell down the bathtub drain, into a wet, warm, dark metal pipe. A new home.

The next call came two days later.

"Laura?"

"Ring ring, babe, open up."

We could hear Nancy's steps rush across the apartment. "What do you mean?"

"I'm downstairs! C'mon, ring me up. The intercom doesn't work."

"How the fuck did you find me?"

"Cindy told me your address."

"How did she know it?"

"You hadn't told her?"

"No, no — no, I hadn't told her my address, dude, I don't know how she got it."

"Guessed so. You know she's good at finding things."

"You can't come up here, I'm busy."

"You got someone over?"

"No."

"You painting your walls?"

"No."

"You masturbating?"

"No, what the hell?"

"Then you're not busy. C'mon, Nance, open up!"

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

“It’s a mess in here, listen to me. You’re not coming up. It’s a mess. I’ll go shower and meet you downstairs.”

“Do you have a ginger neighbour?”

“Don’t tell her you’re coming up —”

“I’m coming up!”

Nancy let out a curse once the call cut off. Her rushed steps echoed throughout the apartment as she moved things around — organizing them, maybe; hiding them, most likely — a clang or two as she threw smaller objects under her bed. The doors to her closet opened and we heard fabric rustling.

Then we heard her blinds open. *Sunlight.*

We had lost our tubers; we had lost our roots. We had lost most of our sprouts and leaves. Yet, in the wet, warm, dark metal pipe right under Nancy’s bathtub, we began growing again in search of life.

The doorbell rang.

“Laura, just wait outside!” Nancy shouted.

“Ring ring, Nance!”

“Gimme a minute, okay?”

“What the hell are you even doing in there? I just wanna see you.”

“Well, you can’t. You saw me a year ago.”

“Year and a half.”

“Same thing!”

The closet doors banged shut.

“Are you mad at me?”

“I’m not mad at you, I’m just not in the mood for guests.”

“You’re never in the mood for guests.”

“For a reason!”

“What’s the reason?”

“Gimme two minutes.”

“Nance, c’mon, just open the door, please. I’m not gonna get grossed out.”

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

“Grossed out — Why would you even get grossed out?”

“You get like this when you’re a mess.”

“Dude, please.”

“Just open up!”

The sharp *click* of the door being unlocked was followed by a slow, creaky swing, then silence. We finally reached the bathtub’s drain. Our petals bloomed one by one.

“Jesus Christ.”

“I know, okay?”

“Jesus, it’s boiling in here.”

Laura walked up to the damaged air conditioner — her steps quicker yet softer, a plastic clanking following her as her body moved. Beads, maybe, or stacks of bracelets like the ones hidden under Nancy’s bed.

“It’s broken.”

“You gotta fix it.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

Even more blinds opened.

“Dude.”

“Yes, it’s a fucking mess, and yes, I have to lock in and clean up and stop being miserable, I know that already.”

“*Dude*.”

“I told you not to come, Laura.”

“You still have your astronaut?”

They paused. We had flowered.

“Yeah, happened to find it the other day.”

“Didn’t know you kept it.”

“You don’t have yours.”

“Yeah, I keep it on my vanity.”

“Cool.”

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

“What happened to your hair?”

“Uh, had a small accident, got stuck somewhere.”

“Listen, how about you go take a shower, and I… I don’t know, try to clean some of this up, then we go have lunch. You can stay with me at the hotel while we work on a deep clean.”

“A deep clean?”

“Just listen to me.”

“Laura, I’m fine like this. It’s fine. I promise.”

“No, no, you need proper sunlight, you need some air, you need actual human food. You’re just rotting in here. You won’t go anywhere living like this.”

“But —”

A sharp smack.

“What the fuck?!”

“Listen to me,” Laura said. “Get your ass in the shower and fix your hair. Now.”

“I’ve tried!”

“Just — Just go shower and I’ll help you with your hair, okay? Just go shower. Call me when you get to your hair, but go shower. Now. Please. I love you.”

I love you. Te amo. Je t’aime. Ti amo. Ich liebe dich. ? ???? ?????.

“Yeah, whatever.”

Nancy’s disgruntled noises got closer to the bathroom before she opened the door and slammed it shut. We heard her undress, throwing her clothes onto the floor and stretching, before she finally stepped into the bathtub, standing tall in front of us. The first drops of water felt cold against our petals but we quickly got used to the new sensation. Right as she wet her hands and dragged them down her face, she looked down at the bathroom drain.

She could see us.

We could see her.

With a frown, she knelt down in the tub, letting the water hit the back of her head as she brought her face closer to us. Our right leaf waved at her.

“Jesus, you’re hard to kill.”

Our sprouts held tighter to the pipe, prepared to get pulled out and thrown into the trash. Instead, Nancy stood back up, continuing her shower.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

“Guess I’ll get you a pot on the balcony.”

Our new home.

THE END.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.