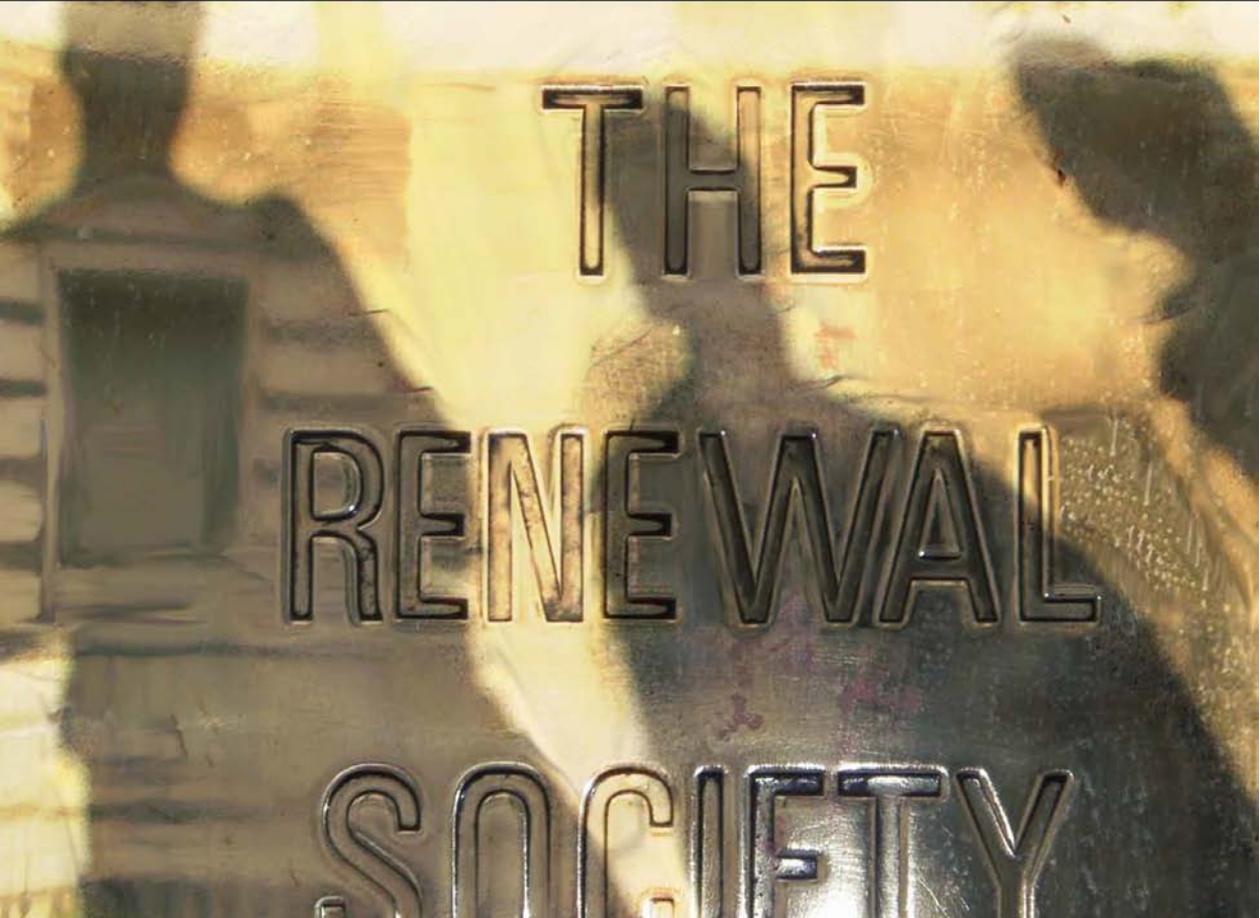


Indefinite *Renewal*

Aaron Rosenberg



THE
RENEWAL
SOCIETY

INDEFINITE RENEWAL

By Aaron Rosenberg



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"Is he ready?"

"I think so."

"There's only one way to be certain."

"I know. I'll take care of it."

"Good."

Chapter One

The blinking red lights spelled 10:43. Nick Gordon put the finishing marks on the last paper, threw the wretched bundle down on his desk, and stretched, feeling his joints pop. If only he hadn't let his officemates talk him into heading down to the cafeteria after Carmichael's lecture! But he'd needed the break, and the company, and he hadn't really wanted to do any grading anyway. Unfortunately, that had only put things off by a few hours, and now here it was, nearly eleven at night, and he was still at work.

He leaned back in his squeaky old desk chair, careful not to knock Gordo's own dangerously high pile of student work off the desk behind him. Their third officemate, Hillary, had disappeared after coffee, saying she needed to prepare for a date—an excuse Nick and Gordo had ridiculed with just a touch of envy in their voices. Neither of them had anyone waiting for them, and they had headed upstairs together to the tiny little warren of their joint office, where Nick had started going over his students' exercises and Gordo had flipped through the latest copy of *Scientific American*.

Gordo had deserted around seven, ostensibly to go home and eat and study, and Nick had buckled down to work again, accompanied only by the songs on the radio and the occasional fly buzzing down the hall. Now he was finally done and he could get some sleep himself. Time enough for Carmichael's project tomorrow. He'd thrown off his schedule, but he could get back on track if he started early and worked through lunch.

At least he didn't have to teach tomorrow—the advantages of a Tuesday-Thursday schedule, balanced against the classes being longer than their Monday-Wednesday-Friday counterparts. Not that he minded the classroom time, just that it ate up his day and played havoc with his plans. Especially when Amy was involved.

Ah, Amy. Nick smiled as he pictured his most persistent student. Hellishly cute, that one, with her jade-green eyes and upturned nose and that faint dusting of freckles just visible beneath her tan, and that long blond hair and those curves and . . . but she was his student, he reminded himself firmly. Unfortunately, his extremely pretty student who clearly had an enormous crush on him. Bon-bons, they were called, and his two officemates gave Nick hell about this one in particular.

Truth be told, he was strongly considering asking her out after the semester had ended. She wouldn't be his student anymore, then. Sure, she was a few years his junior, but it wasn't an impossible gap. He wasn't sure how to make that initial move, however. He'd always been more comfortable with numbers and theories and experiments than with people. Particularly girls. And most particularly cute cheerleaders like Amy Feldmar.

Flipping off his desk light, Nick made sure his notes were up-to-date and safely

locked in his desk drawer, then stood and scooped up his jacket; even in late April Chicago held a chill at night, and he had to walk several blocks to the L. Scanning the room to make sure everything was in place, he hit the light switch and swung the door closed, waiting for the heavy click of the lock before starting down the hall. Well, at least that was done. Now, tomorrow. . . .

His footsteps echoed down the empty corridors as he walked, lost in thought. Most of the lights were already off, and he passed down shrouded tunnels and misty hallways, not at all like the bustling passageways of daytime. Occasionally he heard the sound of other feet somewhere in the dark, and shook his head in sympathy; even the janitors were done and home by now, so it was probably some other poor grad student or professor working late. Whoever said academia was easy had obviously never majored in genetics.

He'd just reached for the stairway railing when a hand came down on his wrist, latching onto him with the strength of a steel clamp and the heat of a live wire. The current passed through him and time seemed to lurch and slow, like a train that had suddenly derailed. He turned slowly, so slowly, every limb as heavy as stone, as—

—pain exploded within him, shards of light stabbing behind his eyes, jagged edges of sound razoring into his head, setting every nerve aflame while—

—shadows enveloped him, the world dimming, darkness creeping in, the hand on his wrist losing focus and detail, everything fading except for—

—thirst burned through him, not just his throat but every fiber of his being gasping for moisture as if he had been squeezed dry, struggling against—

—lethargy, an enormous drowsiness that washed over him, every last erg of energy vanishing at once, his hand dropping lifelessly from the railing, lacking even the strength to hold on, even as—

—the hand vanished from his wrist and time returned to normal, leaving Nick alone, alone in a world of cobwebs and fog and pain and fatigue.

He was swaying at the head of the stairs, his legs incapable of balancing any longer, and he mustered the energy to glance down, peering through the haze his world had become and struggling to bring his own limbs into focus. The image finally cleared and he would have gasped, if his lips weren't stuck together like wrinkled prunes. His jeans, which only moments ago had been close but comfortable, now hung on him as if he were made of thin piping, so loose that the heavy denim swayed freely at the ankles. The hand that strayed across his vision was his, from the small scar where he had snagged himself on the sharp edge of a pool table to the class ring from U Michigan, but

it was no longer the elegant limb piano students had stared at with envy. The tapered fingers were now skeletal, joints protruding from skin that stretched as dry as old parchment, and his palm was half as wide as it had been, as if it had been warped and compressed. He raised his hand to stare at it, but the motion unbalanced him further and suddenly the world twisted around, the stairs rising up like a dog jumping for his throat as Nick felt his feet leave the ground, flailing weakly for some means of support.

I'm falling, he realized, the thought forming at glacial speeds. *I've lost my balance and I'm falling down the stairs*. He had a moment's comfort in the thought that his mind still functioned, albeit more slowly. He couldn't bear the notion of his reason deserting him—that would be far worse than whatever this was. He could worry more about that later, however. For now he rolled himself into a ball, dry limbs creaking with the strain, and shielded his head from the blow that waited at the bottom.

Either the fall was not as far as he had assumed, or shock had cushioned the impact, or he was simply not as lucid as he'd thought, because it seemed that only a brief instant of weightlessness and a slight bump occurred before Nick felt the cold stone of the stairwell under his chest and neck and cheek. As far as he could tell, nothing was broken, and the earlier jolts of pain had faded to a dull throbbing—the effort to protect himself, however, had taken the last of his fading energy, and he simply lay there on the floor, somewhere between fainting and sleeping, his breath barely steaming the cold tile, wondering what to do now.

The problem was taken out of Nick's hands by the sound of footsteps a moment later. They were approaching from downstairs, the bouncy tread of some energetic young student—probably someone just finishing a night class, or heading home from the library. He lay where he was and waited. The sounds grew closer and closer until they were almost deafening, each step jolting through him where his shriveled body touched the ground. Then the footsteps stopped and a voice took their place.

"Oh my God! Are you all right?"

Oh no, he thought, *it's Amy! What is she doing here? Of all the people to see me like this—whatever this is—why her?*

"Excuse me?" Amy tried again. "Hello? Sir?"

He felt a rush of warmth as she approached, then a hand rested upon his shoulder and gently rolled him over. Amy was kneeling over him, folder clutched to her side as she studied his face.

"Are you all right, sir? Did you fall down?"

She doesn't recognize me, Nick thought gratefully, and felt a moment's panic as he wondered what had happened to him, that his favorite student didn't even know who he was. Then her hand rose to straighten the glasses that had slid down his nose but miraculously stayed on and intact during his fall, and in the process she accidentally brushed against his cheek, youthful flesh rasping on wizened skin, and—

—time seemed to slow—

—Amy’s head jerked back, her full lips parting in what began as a scream, fell to a sigh, and wound up a hiss, like escaping air from a tire, while—

—Nick felt energy flood into him in a tidal wave, lifting him up and carrying him in its swell, even as—

—her body jerked as if electrified, and she toppled to the floor, contorting into a fetal position as she fell, though somehow her hand stayed on his face as if glued there, and—

—he felt his body expand, skin and muscles and bone absorbing moisture as it flooded through him, but—

—she shriveled up, skin drying out and hair graying visibly as her limbs shrank and withered and fluttered weakly on the ground, her body sinking into itself just as—

—he felt more alive than ever, bursting with vigor, and rose from the ground in one effortless motion, his body lithe and strong—

—and glanced around to find himself alone at the bottom of the stairs. It was quiet except for his own slightly hurried breaths, and dim, but even so Nick noticed a smudge of some sort on the floor near him, beneath what looked like dirt or trash of some sort. He leaned against the wall, almost giddy from the strange euphoria he felt coursing through him, the sudden sense of enormous vitality, and glanced around. *Did I dream all of this?* he wondered, glancing down at his legs, his hands, and seeing the same body he saw every morning in the mirror. *Did I fall down the stairs after all, and is all of this merely the shock and adrenaline that resulted from it? Was the rest some strange hallucination, perhaps caused by a mild concussion?*

Thoughts and images danced in his head, too swiftly to be caught and analyzed, mere fragments of ideas and possibilities, and he tried to concentrate, to focus on what had just occurred, but his mind spun faster and faster, unable to make sense of it all or to reconcile the recent sensations with his current physical state.

Tap, tap, tap.

The sound of footsteps approaching again, softer than before but nearer, made Nick start and turn, but even as he twisted around his mind and body reached their limits and he felt his consciousness fade as his body shut itself down in an attempt to assess the damage it had incurred. Strong hands caught him as he fell, and the last thing Nick saw before the darkness claimed him was a pile of gray dirt, like ash, near the center of the stairwell, with scraps of cloth mixed in among the soot, and a blue folder half-