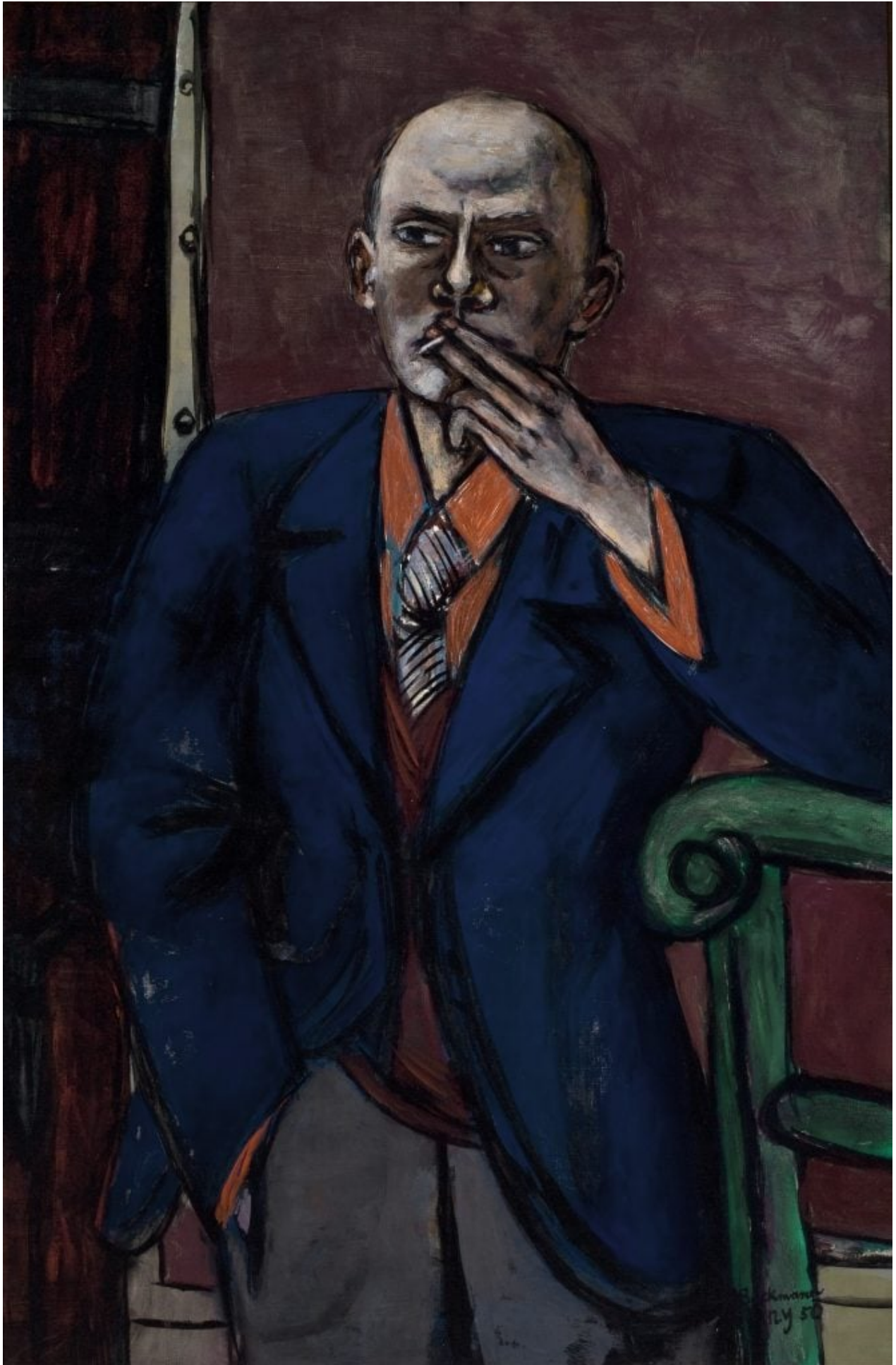


Hieronimus Warren

by [Søren Sørensen](#) (February 2026)



Self-Portrait (Max Beckmann, 1950)

I write fiction to take a break from working on my research proposals. It's some kind of solace, comfort in a time of distress. Writing the proposal feels like an ox pulling the plow, trying to be meticulously accurate and provide references for every single statement. Writing fiction is like a bird soaring in the sky—I am sure you know what I mean. But still there is a dilemma. What to write about? I could write about myself, some kind of an autobiographic essay. It makes sense, as you can only write about someone you know thoroughly, not only from outside but also from inside, meaning your character's thoughts, reveries, beliefs, fears, subconscious fantasies. Then you can present the depiction of your character to the judgment of the reader. The problem here is whether you can be honest. I mean 100% honest, hiding nothing, including those deeply personal moments, the dark, maybe creepy, corners of your life, your dreams and secret ponderings, reflections and meditations, the sorrows and the regrets. Personally, I am not ready for that and don't think will ever be ready. But who knows? As one wise man said, *Never say never*. Be that as it may, the other option is writing about someone else, either a real person you know well enough to write about or a fictitious, made-up character. Here there is plenty of room for fantasy. In the former case, you will be forced to ascribe features to your character that you believe he really possesses but can never be certain. In the latter case, you are free like the above-mentioned soaring bird—describe your hero any way you please. It's justified as long as the character comes out as a live person with unique and interesting, even better—captivating, personal features.

* * *

Right now I feel the urge to write about a real person, Hieronymus Warren, known as Hero in the circle of his friends,

one of whom I had the honor to be. He offered me to call him Hero himself and added: "That's how my friends call me." You noticed I write about him in past tense. Yes, that's the tragic reality.

Today the news came in that Hero was killed in the battlefield by a bullet into his forehead. Harrowing, as it is, the news caused a twirl of feelings in me, yet I am not able to clearly decipher what I feel. Shocked? Not at all. Sad? Not exactly the right word. One thing I am sure about is Hero was happy at the moment of his death. A mundane death in his house or in a hospital bed "surrounded by friends and family" was unacceptable for him as anything else that fits into the concept of *conventional*. Of course all people are different, but Hero was different from all others by a large margin. He was a peculiar man, to say the least, a devout anti-establishment individual, a person of effect, someone for whom the form was as important as the content. He had a great sense of humor, which I strongly believe goes hand in hand with intellect. In fact, oftentimes you would struggle figuring if he was serious or joking. The reason, as I gradually realized as I became closer to him, was that he considered life as a theater, more precisely, a theater of the absurd. As long as life is a joke itself, there is no strict distinction between being serious and wisecracking. *Why is life a joke?* you may ask. *Because of death*, Hero might have answered, although he would surely find a more sophisticated way to explain.

Once he told me that humans are the poorest species on Earth. All species die, but only humans know about it. Human life is treacherous. Not only is there the "natural" death that moves closer and closer as the years keep rolling, but also the malicious, incurable diseases someone has created to make the lives of many people even more miserable. There seems to be no way out of the vicious cycle—true for most people, but not for Hero. The revenge against life's cruelty was to refuse a natural death or death caused by a disease thereby tricking

life itself. He proved all that by the way he died. He nailed it, so to say, achieved his ultimate goal as the bullet punctured his forehead granting him for eternity a tiny round wound much like the red star on his Che Guevara beret he cherished so much.

* * *

I had heard about Hero before our first encounter, which took place at lunchtime in the cafeteria of the Medical School. He was known as *The one who writes poetry*, which was considered as something weird for a physics professor. Hero was a prominent scholar, by the way, whose papers had garnered more citations than anyone else's work in the whole university. He never boasted about it, however. Hero cared little about titles. At the physics department, you would see a sign on the door of the chairman showing the first and last names followed by "Distinguished Professor, Sterling Professor, Trustee Chair..." The sign on Hero's door had two words and one abbreviation: "Hieronymus Warren, PhD." Besides being a top expert in his field of study and writing poetry, Hero was quite knowledgeable in fine art as well. Once he mentioned to me that Erwin Schrödinger wrote in a letter to Max Born "I put beauty before science." For Hero beauty was above everything, not precisely above science, as he found immense beauty in science itself.

Before I go too far, let me return to that day seven years ago when I met this special person named Hieronymus Warren. In the cafeteria, with my tray in my hands, I was skimming the dining hall for a seat and spotted my colleague and collaborator Jake Buonaguro sitting at a table with a gentleman of remarkably expressive appearance, immediately noticeable at a distance. When I was close enough, Jake waved at me and made a gesture inviting to join.

"This is Dr. Warren from the physics department," he said. "I am trying to convince him to join our project."

“Hieronymus Warren,” Hero said, slightly rising and extending his hand. It was a bold, long-haired elderly man of slender build with copious gray eyebrows, sunken cheeks, and vivid eagle’s eyes.

“Hieronymus? Like the famous Dutch artist?” I said.

“I am glad you know him. What do you think of Bosch?” Hero rejoined.

“He is interesting, unusual, kind of...”

“Crazy? Is that what you wanted to say?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Well, someone named Hieronymus can’t be a normal person,” Hero chuckled and then inquired: “What is your subject of study?”

Jake intervened and informed that I was trying to understand the meaning of life.

“Oh, then you are a happy man,” Hero said.

“Why?” I wondered.

“Because you still believe life has a meaning. I have thought about the meaning of life for a long time. Then I realized life is meaningless, which made me infinitely unhappy. However, it was also a relief because the problem was solved—I had gotten the answer. Gradually I became quite a happy man. If there is no meaning in life, it would be silly to worry about anything at all.”

Hero’s judgements were not easily susceptible to criticism. In this case, how would you prove life did have a meaning? I would embark on arguing, referring to the tremendous amount of logic in life, the inconceivable level of sophistication and coordination of the molecules working in a single living cell;

all that could not have been created for nothing. However, just in the middle of arguing I feel a lack of total confidence in what I am saying. After all, the sophistication of the molecular networks and the transition from non-living to living matter may not present the meaning of life in a broader sense. The philosophical and biological perceptions of life are quite different, so you cannot interpret or assess one using the concepts of the other.

Jake had been successful in persuading Hero into our joint research and hence we had to meet rather frequently. Somehow, we befriended each other, something very atypical for the American society where most people hardly know the names of their next door neighbors. Thinking back, I clearly recognize it was all owing to the unique human qualities of our senior colleague. At one of our meetings Hero invited Jake and me to his house for his 75th birthday. We both agreed.

* * *

It turned out Hero lived all alone, not counting his unusual pets—a dog, a goat, and a raven. The goat was grazing in the backyard, the dog was enjoying a nap on the porch, and the raven, which we did not immediately realize was one of the pets, was perched on a branch of an old oak tree just in front of the house. As we got out of our cars, the dog got up, approached us and wagged its tail energetically while Hero caressed its head and the neck. The raven made a few loud caws, stretched its wings, and the next moment was on Hero's shoulder. The goat was quite indifferent. Looking at it, Hero noted:

“The goat is the most useful out of the three. It eats the grass and provides enough manure, so I don't have to mow the lawn or fertilize it.”

The interior of his house was unexpectedly neat and orderly for a single man. There were a couple of paintings, seemingly

originals, on the walls, betokening the affiliation of the inhabitant of the house with fine art, which became even more obvious when Hero walked us into his study full of bookshelves stuffed with books on art, philosophy, physics, and poetry. There was a photograph of an incredibly beautiful woman in a gold-on-enamel Art Deco-style frame on his desk that caught my attention. Neither I nor Jake asked anything, but the question hung in the air as to who that woman was.

A little later the doorbell rang. It was the delivery man with all the food Hero had ordered. After a few drinks the atmosphere became warmer, and Hero started telling us the story of his life. It was a tale of a man who had lived alone, just by himself, for many years, without having candid, guileless conversations with anyone at all. He had developed a philosophy from a young age that he would never get married. Hero believed there was no purpose in producing children. Humankind has proven ineffective, anti-productive, if not destructive. If nobody has children, the human race will die away, there will be no wars, no bombs will explode, the nature will not be poisoned, the animals will live in peace and harmony... This philosophy stayed dominant up to the point when he met Helen. At the time, Hero was an assistant professor at the University of Vermont, and Helen was a graduate student in the lab of one of his colleagues. It was love at first sight, the flames of which engulfed both hearts and set them ablaze very quickly. They officially married soon after Helen's doctorate defense, and a year later their son William was born. "It was the happiest time of my life," Hero murmured musingly.

As time went by, William grew up and their love matured and became stronger. William was a brilliant student, known at his high school as the *Walking Encyclopedia*. Following high school, he got admitted into a university with computer science major but soon dropped out as he became more and more interested in painting. The next year he was a student at

Vermont College of Fine Arts in Montpelier, which he attended for less than two years and left to become an independent artist. Absorption into the world of visual art paralleled, unfortunately, with increasing predilection for alcohol, which gradually consumed William's mind to a point that no one could ever find him sober. He rented a studio on the other side of the city—a studio/apartment full of canvases and boards, paints and paintbrushes, full and empty bottles, cigarette smoke, and naked or half-naked models or one-night girlfriends. In terms of painting, he succeeded in being exposed at a couple of local exhibitions with other artists and was working hard to achieve prominence. Painting became an obsession for him, as did alcoholism, and the latter made his life, as well as the lives of Hero and Helen, total tribulation.

One summer, Hero and Helen decided to have a trip to Europe hoping to forget all troubles and enjoy time together for a period of time, although clearly realizing the thoughts about William left behind would not let them loosen up completely. The trip was an incredibly joyous experience. "I would give anything to return one day of that vacation," Hero muttered. On their return, William met them at the airport in his usual state, i.e., drunk. Hero suggested he would drive but William wouldn't yield, contending he was okay. On the driveway, in front of the house, Hero grabbed a suitcase and walked into the house. While Helen was behind the car, William pushed the gas pedal intending to enter the garage, forgetting the transmission was in the reverse position. Helen was hit, fell onto the concrete and was overrun. Hero ran out of the house to witness the horrible scene. In complete shock, he called 911 with trembling hands. Helen was unconscious and bleeding. The paramedics arrived and took her away promptly, reporting to Hero that she was alive as judged from the pulse. Hero drove right to the hospital, with William sitting in the passenger seat, totally dazed and shaken. Helen was in coma, not to mention the fractured leg. The following week was like

hell. One day Hero received a call from the police reporting William had been transported to a behavioral hospital after a suicide attempt. Helen's condition was unchanged. Two more weeks passed. One morning Hero was called from the hospital. He knew the news will either invigorate or kill him. "When I heard the words *We are sorry to tell you ...* I realized that my life ended. The future will be a spectacle where the empty shell of my body will play the role of myself," Hero concluded.

* * *

That evening of Hero's birthday had a strong impact on me. I had an irresistible desire to do something for him, to help him, though unsure if he needed help at all. He had said before that gradually he became quite a happy man. "If there is no meaning in life, it would be silly to worry about anything at all." I realized I had gotten those statements simplistically, thinking he was really a happy man. Now I knew life was of no value to him. Being happy or unhappy was all the same for one major reason: *There was no meaning in life.*

Shortly after the accident, William moved to New York City, and the next year Hero accepted an offer from Yale University and relocated to Connecticut, where we met. Our project was completed, still Hero, Jake and I maintained the friendship. Jake met Jill from the chemistry department, and they got engaged. I got tenured and was promoted to associate professor and invited Jake, Jill, and Hero to a restaurant for celebration. Hero seemed to be calm and relaxed and gave more than one compliments to Jill. Jake was quite elated and somehow embarked on describing how they met, which was formulated as an improvised mini poem:

*Jake was a physics professor,
and Jill was at chemistry.*

*They were unaware of one another,
till they met in the library.
Jill was reading about chemical bond,
and Jake about magnetic interaction.
The next minute there was chemistry,
there was magnetism, and there was double bond.*

"I like the idea of the double bond," Hero noted. "Yes, love is chemistry, magnetism, and double bond."

I inquired if Hero was still writing poetry. "Yes," he said. "A chapbook will be released in a few weeks. Each of you is going to have a copy of it."

"I believe you have enough material for a real tome of poetry, Hero," Jake suggested.

"I don't know," Hero answered. "I will perhaps write more when I retire. Or maybe I will rather go to Guatemala to start a socialist revolution," he added quite seriously.

"A socialist revolution?" Jill marveled.

"Don't take it seriously, sweetheart. A fool professor is just pondering in the space of spontaneity," Hero asserted with a gentle smile.

The mention of "a fool professor" was not by accident. He had told us earlier that his chairman, Dr. Hampel, was not happy with him and had required a post-tenure review. Hampel's dissatisfaction with Hero's "performance" was mainly based on Hero's many unexplained absences from the faculty meetings, which Hero considered total waste of time. The tension augmented when Hero disappeared for a whole week without notice. Hero had been notified from New York City that William was in intensive care with acute renal failure. He needed kidney transplantation while there was a shortage of

compatible organs at the moment. Hero seemed to be the only match. He travelled there and donated one of his kidneys, paid all the bills as William had no insurance, and returned a week later. Although Hero's class was covered by another faculty member and no damage was done, Hampel was still furious to a level that publicly suggested Hero's resignation.

These issues did not bother Hero, and life seemed to be quite satisfactory until the day he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He underwent radical prostatectomy. After the surgery Hero changed noticeably. He became more confined, somber, melancholic. During one of his lectures an incident happened that affected him profoundly. He had leakage due to his incontinence, a side effect of the surgery, while standing in front of a class of three hundred students, resulting in a sizeable wet spot on his pants. This event suppressed Hero beyond the limits. That was nearly unbearable for Hero, a man of science, art, and poetry, a man for whom beauty and style were so important. Hampel did not miss the opportunity to take advantage of that incident and renew his attacks upon him. At a faculty meeting he brought up the embarrassing event and once again suggested it was time for Hero to retire. Someone argued that it was not a big deal as the incident was involuntary, due to Hero's medical condition. "I am not concerned with his incontinence," Hampel contradicted with contempt, "I am concerned with his incompetence." Nobody was sure what Hampel meant by referring to Hero's incompetence, hence the motion was neither seconded nor voted, to Hampel's dismay.

At another lunch on campus, Hero shared this story with us and added, "Perhaps he is right. The time has come to retire."

"Do what you think is right, Hero," Jake argued. "Don't listen to that double idiot."

"Double idiot?" Hero queried. "What's that?"

“An idiot is someone who is an idiot and knows that. A double idiot is someone who is an idiot but is unaware of that.” Jake explained.

Of course, we all laughed.

“Are you still considering a socialist revolution in Guatemala?” I asked.

“I am not really sure about what will happen after retirement, but an idea has gradually taken shape in my head about what I will do when I die. I will mend my life, will go back and fix all miserable mistakes that I have made. I know in real life it's unattainable, but after death anything is possible. The miserable mistakes that are devouring my consciousness will be revisited and righted, one by one. It will take a long time, I know, but eventually I will complete the task and then, only then, my soul can find peace.”

* * *

Some time passed, and Hero was nowhere to be seen. I went to the physics department to check his office. His name was no longer on the door. I came back and told that to Jake. A little later Jill showed up and told us she had seen Hero a few days earlier. “He was changed. He had a beard and was wearing a beret with a star on it,” she said. I called Hero's home number and offered to meet the next day. He seemed to be reluctant but eventually agreed. In the morning I talked to Jake. He reached out to Jill then told me they would join the dinner that evening.

Hero was different. He was wearing a black beret with a red star on it and an olive colored military-style jacket. Hero told us he had eventually retired. He was less talkative and more contemplative than before. We asked about William. He glanced down for a moment then talked about William's paintings. “William had real talent and passion for art. He could become a good computer scientist or a notable artist but

surrendered to alcoholism, which ruined his life," he murmured.

That dinner was certainly not a blissful one. I personally was grateful that Hero agreed to meet with us one last time. He knew it was the last time, unlike me, Jake, or Jill. Several months later I called Hero again. Neither his home number nor the cell number were responsive. I felt in my guts that something had happened. Was he in Guatemala, organizing a revolution? Very unlikely. Where was he then? That I learned some time later when the news outlets reported that a U.S. citizen named Hieronymus Warren was killed during a combat operation in eastern Ukraine. I am not sure how he got there and managed to reach the frontline despite his age and his health condition, but what I know is he did it. Only someone like Hero could have done that. He achieved what he wanted, something he obviously considered the only way out, the only way out with dignity and pride. Apparently, he had nothing in the whole wide world to care about anymore. The idea that life was meaningless had converted from just an idea into physical reality. All material values he had piled up during his life meant nothing to him in the absence of his loved ones. Those thoughts made me recall the lines from one of his poems included in the chapbook he gave me:

*When I grew older and finally managed to save a whole dime,
I came to a path leading to two doors.
The left one was the door to Eden with an entrance fee of
mere ten cents.
The one on the right had a sign on it: Inferno, five cents.
I knocked on the right door, extended the dime and said
Keep the change.*

Now he will have enough time to revisit his life and fix all

“miserable mistakes” that he had made, the “miserable mistakes” that were devouring his consciousness. I strongly believe some of those “mistakes” were his inability to prevent the accident with Helen, William’s immersion into alcoholism, or his failure to save Helen’s or William’s lives. It will take a long time for him to come to terms with those losses, to mend those “mistakes,” but eventually he will complete the task and then his soul can find peace.

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Søren Sørensen is a full-time physics professor and an occasional poet with a mind of a scientist and a heart of an artist. He uses the pen name Søren Sørensen because his philosophy is like that of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish poet and philosopher, and the founder of existentialism (and his real first name sounds like his).

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