



WILL VAUS

Sheldon Vanauken
The Man Who Received “A Severe Mercy”

Copyright © 2013 Will Vaus

Winged Lion Press
Hamden, CT

All rights reserved. Except in the case of quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission of the publisher.

For information, contact Winged Lion Press www.WingedLionPress.com

Cover photo courtesy of Lynchburg College Archives, Knight-Capron Library

The author has sought permission for quotations and illustrations where he has thought necessary. If there is any instance where he has been remiss, please inform the publisher for corrections in future editions.

Winged Lion Press titles may be purchased for business or promotional use or special sales.

10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1



ISBN-13 978-1-935688-01-3

FOR MARION

“He has made everything beautiful in its time.
He has also set eternity in the human heart.”

Ecclesiastes 3:11

CONTENTS

Prologue: Meeting Van	1
Part One: Intimations (1914-1934)	9
I Indiana Roots	11
II Boyhood & Glen Merle	19
III Culver Military Academy	29
IV Through the Iron Gate	35
Part Two: The Heights & The Depths (1934-1955)	41
V Wabash & Davy	43
VI Love & Marriage	51
VII The War Years	59
VIII Sailing the Keys	67
IX Conviction	73
X Ettarre	81
XI Oxford	87
XII The Leap	95
XIII The Other Side of the Gap	103
XIV C. S. Lewis & Other Friends	111
XV L'il Dreary	117
XVI Mole End	125
XVII Lighten our Darkness	131

Part Three: Wandering (1955-1973)	137
XVIII Van's Grief Observed	139
XIX Flying On "Alone"	147
XX The Idealistic Years	155
XXI The Angry Years	163
Part Four: Return to the Obedience (1973-1996)	171
XXII Twitches Upon the Thread	173
XXIII The Vocation	181
XXIV Letters, a Novel & "Retirement"	189
XXV Home to Rome	195
XXVI Writing Away	203
XXVII Under the Mercy	209
XXVIII The Little Lost Marion and Other Mercies	215
XXIX A Good Correspondent	223
XXX The Setting of the Soul	231
Epilogue	237
Acknowledgements	239
Endnotes	245
Bibliography	281
Index	285
About the Author	295



VANCOT, LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA

Author Photo

PROLOGUE: MEETING VAN

Interesting? Yes, he's certainly that.
You'll never get to the bottom of him.

J. R. R. Tolkien, speaking to George Sayer about C. S. Lewis

What Tolkien said of Lewis, could also be said of Sheldon Vanauken. I doubt any biographer could ever “get to the bottom” of him. However, like many people across the United States and in England, I *began* to know Sheldon Vanauken through reading his bestselling book *A Severe Mercy* in the late 1970s. As described on the back cover of my paperback copy, *A Severe Mercy* is about Sheldon “Van” Vanauken and Jean “Davy” Vanauken, two people who...

... were lucky enough to discover that radiant love so often written of in books, so seldom found in real life. Van and Davy got married, crossed oceans and became inextricably bound up in a search for Christian faith. At Oxford, they met C. S. Lewis and through his influence became believers. Then Davy fell prey to a mysterious illness. What follows is an almost unbearably powerful story of hope and sorrow. Van turned to Lewis, his friend and mentor, for guidance.

That's the story of this bestseller in brief. The book has had at least a million readers to date. The synopsis almost sounds like that of a novel. However, it is a real life story.

What impressed me most about the book when I first read it? *A Severe Mercy* gave to me the same experience of joy or longing that I received from reading some of C. S. Lewis' works. The book did something to my soul I couldn't quite describe. I wanted to enter into the world that Vanauken so ably described. A few years later, when I spent time in Oxford, England on vacation, Vanauken's writing had prepared me for what I was going to see.

During my senior year in college, I read *Under the Mercy*, the sequel to Vanauken's bestseller. It tells the story of Vanauken's life after the death of his wife. In reading *Under the Mercy*, I was challenged by Vanauken's thoughts on feminism, New Testament criticism and the Church. As with *A Severe Mercy*, the words of *Under the Mercy* filled me with joy, but I also became more intrigued with the man under the mercy, Sheldon Vanauken.

Years passed after reading these books and visiting Oxford. I was attending a theological seminary on the east coast and participating in a students' group

SHELDON VANAUKEN

on campus. I was responsible for getting speakers for a lunchtime forum; so, I decided to write to Sheldon Vanauken in Lynchburg, Virginia to invite him to speak to our group about C. S. Lewis. In reply, I received a neatly typed postcard. Vanauken thanked me for the invitation but politely declined to speak. He said that he felt it was his business to write, since God had given him that talent. Consequently, he was in the habit of turning down all invitations to speak, except local ones. The postcard concluded with a counter invitation: "If ever you come down to the South, you will be welcome to stop by."

After graduating from seminary, I was in the South on a number of occasions. In fact, my wife and I lived in North Carolina when we were first married. I recall driving through Lynchburg on one occasion and thinking of Vanauken, but I never went to the trouble of looking him up. Still, I saved the postcard.

More years passed. We moved from North Carolina to California, then back again to South Carolina. My parents moved from Southern California to Virginia and at the same time, I started a C. S. Lewis Society in Columbia, South Carolina. Thus, my thoughts naturally drifted back to Sheldon Vanauken.

I remembered the postcard, searched and found it in a dusty box of old correspondence, and wrote to Vanauken at his old address, not even knowing whether he was still alive. I asked if we could meet when I would next be in Virginia, visiting my parents. Vanauken replied within a week, again on a postcard, this time—handwritten. He said that we could probably meet during my stay in Virginia but that I should ring him up a couple of days earlier to set a time. His phone number, interestingly enough, was VIO-LINS.

The time of my visit to Virginia, eagerly anticipated, finally arrived. I called Vanauken on the telephone as instructed. The voice on the other end was what I expected—genteel, refined, a touch of Oxford perhaps. The day was set for our meeting.

On the day of our rendezvous, I drove two hours from the tiny hamlet of Head Waters, where my parents lived, to Lynchburg. We were to meet at 2:30 that afternoon. I arrived in Lynchburg in time for lunch and a look around. I ate a quick meal at some "greasy spoon", all the while re-reading bits and pieces of *A Severe Mercy*. I strolled across the grounds of Lynchburg College where Vanauken taught English literature and history for some thirty years. I remember the dogwoods were in bloom. The stately red brick buildings and Greek columns of the school where Vanauken had spent the better part of his life left a lasting impression.

At the appointed time I drove to Vanauken's home, Vancot as he liked to call it, or the Birdhouse, so called after a tiny house in Hawaii that he and Davy had planned to live in. In fact, Vanauken and his wife had often walked

THE MAN WHO RECEIVED “A SEVERE MERCY”

by this house and wanted to have it. Therefore, although Davy had never been in it, she knew about it, and that provided Vanauken a sense of continuity after her death. He moved into the house shortly after Davy’s passing, when the building was still part of the Lynchburg College campus, paying just \$30 per month in rent. In the 1960s, when the college decided to build a library extension, the Birdhouse had to go, so Vanauken bought it for \$200 and had the house and its garage moved down the hill. The building was said to have been a one-room schoolhouse dating to the time immediately following the War Between the States. The single storey house with wood siding painted white was only twenty feet by twenty, with an additional little bathroom wing, if you can even call it a wing. Across the street was a small park below the hill on which Lynchburg College was situated.

Parking my car astride the green, Vanauken’s garden, as he liked to call it, I walked across the street and up the broken concrete steps to the bright blue front door. I reached for the knocker Vanauken had rescued from the now demolished Studio, his and Davy’s 1950s Oxford flat. A man soon answered the knock, a man unlike what I anticipated. He was tall, with sandy, graying hair; I expected that. However, he was also a bit overweight and a tad unkempt. His appearance did not match the refined voice I had heard over the telephone line. I introduced myself and Vanauken invited me in. I wasn’t certain until that moment whether he would wish to talk in his home or somewhere else. I was delighted to be ushered into his inner sanctum. Vanauken directed me to the left, into the main room of the house which was at once his living room, bedroom, dining room and library all in one.

“Have a seat in the blue chair,” Vanauken offered.

“Thank you,” I replied, as I crossed the Persian rugs covering the floor and hunted for a chair that looked even remotely blue. On the far side of the hearth was a once over-stuffed chair, threadbare after many years of use, by this time more Confederate Grey than Oxford Blue. I sat in the “blue” chair as invited, and Vanauken sat on his narrow bed—a four-poster crafted of beautiful cherry; it was Vanauken’s bed from his parent’s home, Glenmerle. In fact, most of the furniture was from Glenmerle. As I scanned the room I saw in the opposite corner a tall antique bookcase, filled with hardback volumes. Atop the bookcase was Vanauken’s Navy cap from World War II. Beside the bookcase was a small sofa underneath three large windows trimmed with royal blue curtains. Beside the sofa was a leaded-glass Gothic floor lamp, the kind with a small table half way up the stem. Between the lamp and the bed was a table filled with numerous books, including Vanauken’s current read—Colleen McCullough’s *Caesar’s Women*. Nearby was a wooden laptop contraption Vanauken had made for writing in bed. Above the head of the bed was a small painting by Davy. On the wall at the side of the bed were two

crucifixes, one was Norman, a copy of one Vanauken had given to C. S. Lewis that had hung over the bed in which Lewis died. Along the same wall was a tiny window to which Vanauken had pasted a handmade map of Lynchburg and surrounding territory. Beneath the window was a small shelf on which he kept odds-and-ends he wanted handy. Along the wall at the foot of the bed was a small Chippendale secretary desk and chair made of the same cherry wood. The glassed cabinet at the top of the desk revealed an assortment of editions of Vanauken's own books.¹

Shortly after we were seated, Vanauken lit a cigarette. The walls were yellowed by forty years of smoke. From time to time during our conversation, Vanauken would lift his legs on to the bed and lay on his side. Was he in some kind of pain or merely eccentric? I wasn't sure.

Vanauken opened the conversation with, "So what do you do for a living?" "I'm a pastor in Columbia, South Carolina." I responded.

"And you drove all the way from South Carolina to see me?" Vanauken queried.

"Actually, I drove over here from my parents' home, outside of Staunton."

"I attended Staunton Military Academy in my early teens," Vanauken informed me. Despite Vanauken's outward man wasting away, to use St. Paul's expression, his inner man was certainly vital. His mind and conversation were alive to ideas, current events, to all of life. Vanauken's keen intelligence shone through his flashing blue eyes.

After we talked for a while, Vanauken stood up and asked, "Would you like a drink? Gin-and-tonic? Or whiskey?"

I hesitated for a moment leading Vanauken to query with a look of feigned horror, "You're not a teetotaler are you?"

I quickly responded, "No, I just don't drink gin or whiskey."

"How about a glass of sherry?"

"That will be fine."

While Vanauken was in his tiny yellow kitchen fixing our drinks, I further surveyed the room. In the midst of the wall behind me was a fireplace. Some of Davy's paintings and the figurehead of "Grey Goose", the Vanaukens' former sailboat, hung above the mantle. On the hearth sat an old typewriter, the one on which he had typed the manuscript of *A Severe Mercy* and which he still used to type his voluminous correspondence. On either side of the fireplace were two, floor-to-ceiling, built-in bookshelves. I quickly found Vanauken's collection of Lewis books on the right-hand side. They were all hardback, some first editions, one of *Mere Christianity* and another of *A Grief Observed* by N. W. Clerk. Newspaper clippings of some early reviews fell out of these Lewis volumes as I perused. There were also Lewis' letters to Van stuffed between some of the pages.

THE MAN WHO RECEIVED “A SEVERE MERCY”

When Vanauken returned with the drinks I commented, “I love your books, especially some of the Lewis first editions.”

“Well, I don’t have them because they are first editions. I just happened to be living in or visiting Oxford when some of those books were first published. That’s how I acquired them.”

Sensing his mood I said, “It is a shame that some people love old books but never read what’s in them.” We both laughed.

“What about the letters tucked in some of the books? Are those the originals?” I queried.

“Heavens no! I gave the originals to the Bodleian Library in Oxford long ago.”

When we had resumed our seats, I asked Vanauken about Glenmerle, his boyhood country home. “I could picture what the house and grounds were like from your description in the first chapter of *A Severe Mercy*.”

“That’s good. That is exactly what I intended,” he responded.

“Is Glenmerle still in existence?” I asked.

“It was swallowed up by the growth of the city,” Vanauken answered with a wary look of sadness on his face.

“What city swallowed it up?” I pursued.

“I’ll leave you to figure that out,” Vanauken countered.

“I always thought of Glenmerle being in Virginia.” I said.

At this Vanauken smiled. He always wanted people to think he was born and bred in the South. However, later on in the conversation he gave me a clue as to Glenmerle’s location.

Changing the subject I asked, “What was C. S. Lewis like?”

“He was a hearty man with a booming voice. When we walked into a pub together, he would call out to the publican, ‘Any pies today?’ When I was at Oxford in the 50’s there would be three or four hundred students attending Lewis’ lectures. They would sit spell-bound by that great voice.”

“What about Lewis’ home, The Kilns? You visited there?” I asked.

“Yes, on more than one occasion. I met his wife Joy there, shortly after one of her hospital stays. She was in bed in the common room and Jack left us alone together for the first half hour of our visit, just so we could get acquainted without him interrupting us.”

“What was Joy Davidman like?”

“She was very courteous to me. I did not see anything of the brash, New York, Jewess that some of Jack’s Oxford friends didn’t care for.”

“Did you ever spend the night in Lewis’ home?”

“No, but I did stay overnight with Jack when he was a professor at Magdalene College, Cambridge. We stayed up very late one night talking about all manner of things. I wish now that I had kept notes on the conversation.”

SHELDON VANAUKEN

“Tell me about your last visit with C. S. Lewis. What was that like?”

“I saw Jack at The Kilns a couple of weeks before his death in November 1963. We were alone in the house. Jack warned me that he might doze off during our visit and not to worry. I still got concerned when he actually did nod off in the middle of our conversation and he didn’t wake up for a couple of minutes! Later he perked up and we moved from the common room to the kitchen where he served me a cup of tea. We planned to meet again a couple of weeks later.”

“But you didn’t?”

“No, we weren’t able to. I was having breakfast with a friend in Oxford one morning. Reading the *Oxford Mail* I saw Jack’s obituary. The day of his funeral was the day we were supposed to meet again. Instead of attending the funeral, I went to the Eastgate Hotel, had a drink, and reminisced about our friendship.”

“Do you have any photos from your time in Oxford?”

“Very few. I had given up photography by that time of my life. I much prefer to draw pictures with words. Mind you, I once took a photo of Jack that was later published in a book somewhere. There are some photos in that burgundy colored book on the shelf behind you. You are welcome to take a look.”

I reached behind me and pulled a book off the shelf entitled *A Severe Mercy: Davy’s Edition*. Vanauken told me, “There are only ten thousand copies of that edition. It was printed mostly as a gift for friends and *Severe Mercy* enthusiasts.”

On the frontispiece of *Davy’s Edition* is a color print of Davy’s “Sin Picture” which is mentioned in the book. There are also eight pages of pictures in the middle. Later that year my wife and my mother got together to buy me a copy of *Davy’s Edition* from a rare book dealer. On my next visit to see Vanauken, he signed the title page: “To Will Vaus—a good correspondent. Sheldon Vanauken.”

After perusing the book, we continued our conversation. “Did you see the movie *Shadowlands* with Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger?” I queried.

“Yes, I saw it in the theater.”

“What did you think?”

“Hopkins was not at all like Jack. Debra Winger was a good Joy Davidman. And the actor who played Warnie was perfect for the part.”

“What about the BBC version of *Shadowlands*?”

“I don’t own a television but some friends showed it to me on their set. Joss Acland gave a much more accurate portrayal of Jack. However, both Acland and Hopkins were too sentimental. When it came to handling grief, Jack had a rod of steel down his spine, at least when it came to talking about

THE MAN WHO RECEIVED “A SEVERE MERCY”

his grief with outsiders.”

Vanauken and I plumbed some spiritual depths in our first meeting. We talked about the reality of the spiritual realm—both the good and evil sides. We shared with one another experiences we both had with people involved in the occult.

After an hour or so of conversation, I asked Vanauken if I could use his bathroom. He pointed the way. In the bathroom, I noticed a photo of Pope John Paul II propped up on a table. When I returned to the main room I used the photo as an opportunity to ask Vanauken yet another question.

“I noticed the picture of the Pope. Obviously, you admire him greatly. But why did you join the Catholic Church after living for so many years as an Anglican?”

Vanauken responded with keen interest, “Because of apostolic succession. I came to the point where I realized that the only true apostolic succession is through the Catholic Church because the Bishop of Rome is the successor of Peter. Therefore, the Catholic Church is the only true church. Protestants talk about the Bible being the Christian’s ultimate authority, but 1 Timothy 3:15 says that the Church is the pillar and bulwark of the truth.”

“What about the relationship between faith and works in justification?”

“You need both. I am skeptical of the ‘born again’ experience and assurance of salvation claimed by many evangelicals. We Catholics believe we must be ‘born again,’ or have many conversions throughout our lives.”

From there the conversation meandered through all the Catholic/Protestant hot buttons: the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the role of Mary in the Church, the tension between being true to the teachings of Scripture vs. unity with other believers in Christ. With regard to this last point Vanauken said, “In the tension between truth and unity one must trust the Church.”

I glanced at my watch and was surprised to discover we had been talking for three hours. It was dinnertime and my stomach was growling but I certainly did not want the conversation to end. I asked, “Would you like to go out to dinner?”

“No, I don’t go out to dinner anymore, though I often do go out to a restaurant for lunch.”

“Well then, I’d better be going.”

“You don’t have to rush off.” Vanauken encouraged.

“No, I better go. I have a long drive ahead.”

As Vanauken walked me to the door I paused by the shelf with the C. S. Lewis books and said, “I’ve felt very close to Lewis while visiting you. I might have to come back and visit these books again.”

Vanauken smiled and said, “You’ll be welcome anytime.”

SHELDON VANAUKEN

We covered an amazing amount of ground in our first conversation on that April day in 1996. However, I felt like I had only begun to paddle on the surface of Vanauken's amazing life, a life that spanned most of the twentieth century, a life that witnessed events as diverse as the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the March on the Pentagon. Indeed, I was soon to wade deeper into the life of this unusual man, discovering through our correspondence and through subsequent research, that there was a lot more to Sheldon Vanauken than being the author of one bestselling book.

PART ONE

INTIMATIONS

1914-1934

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Appareled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

William Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*



INDIANAPOLIS STAR NEWSPAPER
SKETCH OF VAN'S FATHER

I

INDIANA ROOTS

I have always been a wand'rer
Over land and sea
Yet a moonbeam on the water
Casts a spell o'er me
A vision fair I see
Again I seem to be
Back home again in Indiana.
Ballard MacDonald

Sheldon Frank Van Auken was born August 4, 1914. As Van² once pointed out, he was born the same day that England declared war on the German Kaiser.

However, what Van didn't like to point out was the place of his birth. Why was he so secretive about it? As one colleague said, "Indiana was not where he wanted to be from."³ This "looking down upon" the place of his upbringing can be traced fairly far back in Van's life. In 1951, he wrote to Dr. Osborne of Wabash College in Indiana about a possible return to teach at his alma mater. In that letter Van wrote, "It's hardly necessary to expand on why I should like to return to Wabash. I am, after all, Indiana born (which is more important than I once thought)."⁴

Van was a lover of the Old South from very early on in his life, as indicated in *A Severe Mercy* by the tiny Confederate battle flag pinned to the wall in his Glenmerle bedroom.⁵ Perhaps Van's love of Virginia can be dated to his brief time at Staunton Military Academy in Virginia during the school year of 1928 to 1929. At any rate, it is clear that Van came to wish, at some point in his life, that he had been born and raised in Virginia. He wanted so much to be from the South that he once wrote to a correspondent pointing out that Indiana was part of the territory of Old Virginia.⁶ This statement is historically true (in 1803 part of Virginia became Ohio and Indiana territory) but it also reveals much about Van's *desired* birthplace.

For some reason, Van also chose to change the spelling of his family name from Van Auken to Vanauken.⁷ No one knows why. When I lived in Irmo, South Carolina Van wrote to me and said that he wished he dwelt, like me, in a four-letter town and had a four-letter first name and last name. Maybe that's why he chose to be called Van, at least as early as his time in the Navy; it was, simply, a shorter first name. Moreover, perhaps Vanauken sounds more Anglicized; Van was a lover of England as much as he was a lover

of the Old South, a love that was born in him, perhaps as early as the year he spent in England as a small boy.⁸ He never showed much interest, that I know of, in his Dutch heritage.

The name “Van Auken” means “from Auken.” Auken may be an alternate spelling of Aachen, the favored residence of Charlemagne and the place of coronation for the medieval kings of Germany. Going further back, Aken was the Egyptian custodian of the ferryboat carrying the souls of the dead to the Underworld. It seems an appropriate family name for a man who would come to love boats and a man who would write a bestselling book chronicling not only a great love and a unique conversion, but also a tremendous grief.

Van’s family tree can be traced back at least as far as Marinus Van Aken who emigrated from Holland to Ulster County, New York sometime before 11 April 1683 when he married his wife in Kingston.⁹ Marinus’ great great-grandson was Jacob Hornbeck Van Auken, born in Machackemack (Deerpark near Port Jervis), Orange County, New York on 13 August 1810.¹⁰ This Jacob was Van’s great-grandfather, the one whom he describes in *A Severe Mercy* as the owner of “the great farm called Magic Grove, a grove planted in a mathematical figure.”¹¹ The *History of Steuben County Indiana*, published in 1885, refers to Jacob’s birthplace as being Pike County, Pennsylvania, whereas the US Census of 1870 indicates Jacob’s birthplace as New Jersey. All of these, in a sense, may be correct. Machackemack was located in what is now known as the Tri-State area, the place where Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York states all meet. According to the *History of Steuben County*:

[Jacob] attended the country schools of Sussex County, N. J., his feet clad in rags, later to be exchanged for leather shoes purchased with quails which he had entrapped. The lad’s perception and memory were bright and, accordingly, at sixteen he graduated from the college of the common people with the degree of master of the three R’s, reading, ‘righting and ‘rithmetic. Shortly thereafter we find him the leading schoolmaster of Peter’s Valley, and studying also logarithms and surveying under a private tutor. Among his pupils was Nancy Strawway, nearly five years his junior, to whom in March, 1831, he was married, a relationship which lasted nearly fifty years, to her death July 19, 1878. Four years later, Oct. 6, 1882, he also died from the gradual bursting of the heart.¹²

Soon after Jacob’s marriage to Nancy, they decided to try their fortunes in what was then known as “the far West.” They settled in Deerfield, Portage County, Ohio, which was, many years later, coincidentally, the birthplace of Van’s mother. In Deerfield, Jacob and Nancy had three children born to them. Jacob divided his time between farming and teaching in the village school where one of the patrons was Jesse Grant, the father of Ulysses S. Grant.