

WHEN
BUTTERFLIES
CRY

By
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CHAPTER 1

Monday, August 11, 1969

Two events on different sides of the planet
happened at exactly the same instant.

One of them was in the
Vale of Amberclewydd, Wales,
where it was 10:33 a.m.

Alastair Shelbourne stopped in his daily trek up the mountain to the ridge when he heard voices rising out of the fog that lay like clotted cream in the valley at his feet. On the first day of the school year, children in the Gaynor Junior School were singing *All Things Great And Beautiful* and their voices, drifting eerily up through the thick white mist into the bright morning sunshine, were the voices of angels. The 62-year-old grandfather stood still, listening. Then he smiled. It was the last time he ever would.

Seconds later, he heard a grinding, rumbling sound. When he looked up, his final smile melted off his face like wax from a flickering candle flame. The gigantic pile of coal slurry on the mountain above the village—above the *school*—was *moving!* The slurry had begun to slide, to flow down into the fog below in great liquefied waves, a thundering avalanche of black death.

For every moment of Alastair's few remaining hours on earth, he would hear that rumble. Long after a sudden, eerie silence fell over the village below, long after the screams of the injured and the desperate cries of horrified parents ripped open the very throne room of heaven itself, he would hear the roaring, crashing, grinding sound of a million tons of coal waste plunging down the mountainside.

Only one other villager saw the slag heap collapse into the valley below. From a field dotted with grazing milk cows above the puddle of fog near the school, ten-year-old Andy Shelbourne turned from a just-milked Welsh Black, stared in stupefied horror and went instantly numb all over. The bucket slid out of the child's unfeeling fingers and dropped to the ground. Even before the milk splashed out on the grass, the youngster had kicked off the heavy, muddy Wellies and was sprinting barefoot toward the gray stone building where the sound of children singing had begun to falter, drowned out by a great rumbling roar.

Just as the wall of liquefied coal waste slammed into the back of the school, Andy raced through the front door, looked up and saw the roof collapsing. There was only time and breath enough to call out a single word—Baby Girl's name.

With that cry, a sound echoed in the child's head, as if the name were ricocheting off the stone walls in the ancient village church. But the echoing voice was not Andy's. *Someone else* had cried out and the two anguished voices melded to produce an agonized wail so loud and powerful that for a frozen moment it drowned out the roar of the black monster hurling down the mountainside.

Only for a moment, though. Then the rumble swallowed the world and the avalanche buried the school and everyone in it beneath more than a million tons of sticky coal slag. No one inside Gaynor Junior School that day got out alive.

The other event was 6,000 miles away,
on the east bank of the Song Dong Nai River, South Vietnam,
where it was 4:33 p.m.

At the instant a little girl's name rang out above the roar of death itself in a Welsh village, U.S. Army Chaplain Grayson Addington fell to his knees outside another village on the other side of the planet, tilted his head back and called out another little girl's name.

"Sadie!"

When the word left his lips, the name reverberated in his head, echoed like it was bouncing around in an oil drum. More than that, he heard another voice cry out a name, too, in perfect unison and the combined voices produced a great roaring in his head.

There followed a moment of such profound silence that surely the universe held its breath, the globe of earth stopped revolving on its axis and ceased spinning around the sun. Something happened in that moment. Something fearful and powerful. Grayson sensed it, but didn't know what it was.

Then he slumped and whispered, "Almighty God, *please!* Protect her!"

Life slowly let out the gasp it had sucked in, breathed a tormented sigh of fear, pain and loss, and Grayson felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Padre?"

He opened his eyes and for a moment saw nothing but bright light. Then the reality of steaming jungle, the river stink of black mud and dead fish, the harsh, staccato bark of Vietnamese voices and his pack straps cutting into his shoulders slammed down around him with a clang like the door of a jail cell banging shut.

"You okay, sir? You were yelling."

"Yeah, I'm ..." he struggled to his feet and bent to pick up his helmet. The small silver cross on the front was barely visible through the encrusted mud.

Grayson was tall, six feet four, with a rugged, beard-stubbed face where easy smiles once fit comfortably in the folds around his mouth. His hazel eyes, at one time warm and engaging, now peered out of deep, dark hollows beneath thick black brows. When he clamped his helmet back on his head, a lock of dirty hair Piper maintained was "the color of maple syrup" escaped to fall in a widow's peak on his forehead.

Beside Grayson was one of the replacements, the new guy, Washington. They called him Dollar Bill, or sometimes just Dollar. The soldier looked at him with obvious concern in his eyes. Young eyes. Nineteen, maybe. Greenhorn. It didn't take long here to learn how to stifle your give-a-damn and when that happened, Dollar Bill wouldn't allow himself to care about *anything*—about the guy next to him getting his arm shot off—let alone worrying about Grayson's momentary brain burp.

That's what it'd been. A brief black-out. A flashback. It wasn't the first. But all the others had been re-enactments of his ever-growing repertoire of horrible experiences. What he could remember of this one—it was fading blessedly fast—was utter darkness. Then the darkness moved, writhed, rumbled and he realized it was a thing, a living thing with dumb, evil intent—rushing toward Sadie! The toddler sat playing happily in her grandmother's front yard in the West Virginia sunshine and the huge monster was after her, its mouth open, ready to—

Head injury. Combat fatigue. Exhaustion. Shell shock. Take your pick.

"Father, I—"

"Do I look like your father, soldier?" Grayson growled. He pointed to his neck. "You see a white collar?"

“No, sir. It’s ... I understand why you...” He glanced back over his shoulder at the village where a little girl stood beside the last hut.

Grayson turned then and his eyes met hers.

“Go on,” he told Dollar Bill and shrugged the young soldier’s hand off his shoulder. “Give me a minute.”

Grayson was nailed to the spot by Nguyen’s gaze. He could only look, though. He couldn’t do anything to help her. He couldn’t protect her when the Cong slipped into the village tonight or tomorrow or the next day. Flushing out collaborators, summarily executing anyone who’d gotten chummy with the Americans.

Had Nguyen been careful to throw away all the candy wrappers? Had she—?

“Gotta go *now*, Padre,” KFC, the radio man, called out. The squirrely little chicken farmer was as jumpy as spit on a griddle.

“All the APCs are gone but ours,” Haystack put in. “We don’t hurry, we’re gonna be flyin’ solo.”

Dollar Bill put his hand on Gray’s shoulder again and this time Gray reluctantly allowed Dollar’s grip to urge him toward the armored personnel carrier. But he kept looking back. His gaze was hooked to Nguyen’s until she lowered her head, turned and walked slowly into the village. As he stumbled toward the waiting APC, he frantically tried to banish Nguyen’s face, tried to replace it with the face of his own little girl. He hadn’t held Sadie, touched her soft skin and golden hair since she was eighteen months old, had watched her grow into an adorable toddler in pictures. But he couldn’t find those images, those frozen moments in time, anywhere in his head. He only saw Nguyen, imagined her face a mask of terror if somebody in the village ratted her out. Surely, no one would. She belonged to *all* of them. Still ...

Two days later
Wednesday, August 13, 1969
Vale of Amberclewydd, Wales
Noon.

It was the fog. Maybe if it hadn’t been foggy that morning down in the valley ... Maybe ... “Maybes’ll drive ye daft,” Alastair Shelburne said aloud in Welsh, but nobody heard him and most wouldn’t have understood him if they had. Only the old in Gaynor still spoke their native language.

If the fog hadn’t ... He didn’t speak the words, but he couldn’t keep them out of his mind as he stood in the tiny vestibule of the small Welsh chapel, the cold of the ancient stone floor seeping up through the holes in his shoes, the smell of wet dirt mixed with the cloying aroma of death in his nostrils.

Stretched out on the hand-carved oak pews in the sanctuary were one hundred nine bodies from the school, laid feet to head, four to a pew some of them because they were so small. The cemetery would soon be full of fresh-cut headstones, white teeth among the centuries-old gray stones so pitted and weathered the names had long since worn away.

There’d be one hundred thirty-one new graves once they recovered all the bodies. They’d dug out Baby Girl. She lay in there beyond the wooden doors, her face waxen, only 6 years old! His older grandchild had been home with the cows that day and should have been safe! But Andy’d rushed into the school to save Baby Girl. Alastair let out a shuddering sigh. Now Andy was gone, too, still entombed with more than a dozen other children and two teachers in the rubble of a school buried under a pile of coal slag fifty feet deep! They wouldn’t dig down to the bottom of it for ...

If they’d seen it coming, they could have got out, got away!

He didn't believe that, of course. He *had* seen it coming and there'd been no time to get the children out. But there had to be someone, something to blame. One hundred and twenty-two children—6, 7 and 8 years old—half the children in the village!—had been crushed to death at their desks as their sweet voices carried up to him through the mist.

Alastair strangled back a sob. Wasn't seemly to cry in public, though he was alone in the vestibule with no one there to see. Both his grandchildren, his only kin in all the world, were gone.

The thick white fog had hidden death from the children's tender eyes but not from their ears. They'd heard the rumble. That sound had been growling non-stop in Alastair's head day and night since it happened two days ago. He couldn't sleep for the roar of it. Couldn't think with it booming in there between his ears. It was the last sound the precious little ones ever heard.

It would be the last sound Alastair Shelbourne ever heard, too.

The old man turned and stepped out of the church into air so wet it left moisture on every surface it touched. He lifted his shotgun. A small man with short arms, he could still reach the length of the barrel with the end of it in his mouth. Alastair Shelbourne was the first villager who crumbled under the staggering weight of grief. He wouldn't be the last.

The rifle barrel felt cold on his lips, cold as death. Then he squeezed the trigger.

Wednesday, August 13, 1969

Late afternoon

North of Long Binh, South Vietnam

The sound of a single gunshot startled Grayson Addington awake. He didn't pass through any of the intermediate stages, didn't go from groggy or fuzzy to bleary-eyed alert. He simply went from sound, dreamless sleep to hyper awareness in an instant.

Well, there was a moment of confused disorientation until he figured out that he had, indeed, fallen sound asleep standing up. He dug at his swollen red eyes with knuckles cracked and oozing pus from jungle rot. Shook his head. He had only blinked—or so he thought—as he leaned against the last remaining wall of a hut in ... Nope, it was gone. The name of this particular village was nowhere in his memory banks. It looked, smelled, sounded and felt exactly the same as the previous half dozen villages they'd passed through in the two days since he'd climbed into the last APC in a convoy and driven away from a dark-eyed little girl. He hadn't slept more than a few hours snatched here and there since then, couldn't close his eyes without seeing her face.

At least Grayson hadn't dropped his rifle when he nodded off, still clutched the M16. Well, technically it wasn't *his* rifle, of course. Grayson was a chaplain; chaplains were non-combatants.

"They're pulling out," he whispered to Haystack, incredulous.

One shot meant they were leaving, didn't it? Full scale frontal attacks came at dawn and dusk, when the light made it hard to see them in the undergrowth. Sneak attacks came at night, when you sometimes didn't find out the gooks were there until you felt the cold steel of a bayonet.

Haystack was crouched in the bushes in front of a tree a few feet away, a gangly farm kid with hay-colored hair that went every which way—even wet. He'd said the only time in his life he hadn't had to slick it down with *Vitalis* was when they'd shaved his head in boot camp. But it had grown out long now.

Haystack'd gone boots-down out of the same gunship as Gray, the first chopper carrying Charlie Company of the 151st Infantry Kentucky National Guard, and now his short timer's stick was so short he carried it in his pocket! A short timer's stick was a wooden staff

three or four feet long and two inches in diameter that soldiers marked in some way each day to keep track of their time in-country. Some were elaborate works of art, others were simple, but Haystack had sat down that first night and carefully carved on the stick every day he had left—deep grooves evenly spaced from one end to the other. Then every morning after that, he cut off the end of the stick at the last mark. Now, it was the size of a harmonica. Gray had left his ... somewhere.

Just like Gray, Haystack and the remaining members of Charlie Company weren't even supposed to be on this patrol. They were all 30-days-and-out. Short-timers like that weren't reliable. Once you'd made it through 11 months here and the end was in sight, you got to acting funny. The fatalism that kept the terror at bay began to evaporate as soon as you could see daylight at the other end, could actually consider life and people and a world beyond. Some short-timers would start wearing two flack jackets, would sleep in their helmets or keep their faces ash-blackened even when they weren't on patrol. Haystack had stopped brushing his teeth because he said he didn't want them shining, making a target. Had completely stopped smiling, too.

"Haystack, you reckon they're gone?" Gray whispered.

Haystack still didn't answer. Gray turned to look at him, saw the bullet hole in the center of his forehead right below the lip of his helmet and the gray slime of his liquefied brains on the tree trunk behind him.

Well, that explained the one gunshot. Sniper.

Gray sucked in a breath, tensed for the agonizing blow of grief, but it didn't come. He felt nothing at all. And that scared him almost as bad as the gooks still hiding out there in the trees. He couldn't muster so much as a wisp of sorrow, let alone shed a tear for a poor kid who still had a trace of adolescent acne and had admitted shamefacedly that he was still a virgin at 19.

Setting aside emotion—terror, grief—to do what had to be done was what soldiers called "Doin' the necessary." Gray had gotten way too good at it.

Then the edges of the world around him began to soften, darken. Long shadows stretched out toward him, sound dialed slowly down until he could hear nothing at all. He shook his head furiously to clear it. Battle fatigue. Exhaustion. Like what had hammered him outside Nguyen's village. No, *not* like that. Not at all. Something had *happened* then. Some great force, some pulsing energy had—

He froze, stared at the road with wide, unbelieving eyes. Then Grayson Addington forgot all about the power he'd felt two days ago that was destined to change the course of every day of the rest of his life. The power that was, in fact, at work at that very moment on a West Virginia mountainside. He forgot about everything, his attention riveted to the apparition that had emerged from the trees on the other side of the road.

Nguyen!

At first, Grayson thought he really had blacked out, that he was hallucinating. But then KFC hollered, "Look, it's Nguyen!"

It couldn't be, but it was. The little girl he'd abandoned two days ago in Yan Ling, at the mercy of the other villagers to protect her from the murderous wrath of the Viet Cong—that little girl had just stepped out of the jungle. She merely stood there, looking at Grayson.

"How'd she get here?" Dollar Bill called out. He was crouched beside an overturned cart, next to the bloated carcass of a dead pig. "We left her thirty clicks back."

A click was a little over half a mile.

"She couldn't have walked this far," Beanie said from the other side of the cart. "*Somebody* brought her ..."

"...and it wasn't *us*," Bagpipes finished for him from his spot a few feet back, hunkered down behind a stack of firewood.

Grayson's heart began to hammer in his chest and every explosive pump shook him. As he watched, hypnotized, Nguyen took a couple of steps in their direction, then stopped.

"Hi, Grape!" she called out. Her lips parted in a huge smile, so wide it seemed to split open the whole bottom portion of her face. Belying its presence were twin streams of tears sliding down her cheeks.

Grayson felt a hole open beneath him, felt himself begin to topple down into it.

"I find you," she said in forced cheeriness, paused, then continued just as cheerily, "Now you un-ray."

Un-ray. Pig Latin for ... *Run!*