

THE SPHERICAL FISH
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translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

When the sun stops, the time in the Rocky Mountains will be 6:20. In the morning. The newlyweds from Denver, Jessica and Charlie, snuggling under an Indian blanket pulled up to their chins, will be sitting on a wooden bench in front of a hunting lodge, watching the sunrise. It will be beautiful.

The first rays will appear beyond the ridge, lighting up the distant, snow-capped peaks. The birds will be waking up and starting to sing. Jessica and Charlie will be holding hands. They will kiss each other's frostbitten ears and will wait for the sun to rise. They will watch for a whole hour, drinking instant coffee, but the sun will not budge. Something is going on – Charlie will begin to suspect and will grab his hunting rifle, just in case.

They will have breakfast. The panic inside them will rise. Charlie will kick himself for not taking at least a small transistor radio, so they could find out what is going on, for crying out loud. He will suggest that this is just a mirage, but it won't be very convincing. Somewhere around the fifth hour, Jessica will burst out crying, while Charlie, to calm her down and inspire her confidence, will start blasting away in all directions with his hunting rifle. Jessica, however, will not calm down. On the contrary, she will start bawling all the harder and will say that in her opinion, all that blasting away is stupid.

Charlie will stop shooting, he will admit slightly irritably that it really is pretty stupid, and he'll start thinking. Since he's a smart guy, he'll soon come up with something. He'll tell Jessica that they'll go down in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the people who have watched the sunrise for the longest, and they'll be rich and famous. Impressed, Jessica will clap her hands and shut up instantly. Like most women, she, too, will consider herself artistic and will be dying to be rich and famous. A little while later, however, she will voice the doubt that they'll hardly believe them without proof. To this, Charlie will respond with remarkable logorrhea, in the end convincing her that if they both swear to it, the folks from Guinness will believe them.

The two of them will fall silent on the bench and continue gaping at the sunrise. They will hold hands and kiss each other's frostbitten ears. During the 25th hour, right when they will feel like falling asleep, something will happen. Over the ridge, where the sun should have risen, a distinctive golden fin will appear. Over the course of ten minutes, the whole body of the Spherical Fish will reveal itself to the newlyweds' astonished gaze. The Spherical Fish

will open its silent mouth, it will majestically turn its head south, it will flap its tail and swim off in that direction at high speed. It will leave behind a sort of pale green, slightly phosphorescent fog.

With sinister precision, which will rule out any randomness whatsoever, the Spherical Fish will mark the entire path it will traverse with that greenish fog. The path will be long and will cross over the Rocky Mountains, above the Pacific Ocean, Antarctica, the South Pole, the Indian Ocean, the island of Sumatra, the North China Plain, the Gobi Desert, the Central Siberian Plateau, the Arctic Ocean, and the North Pole.

Its lap around the earth will last around 24 hours, with the Spherical Fish moving in a straight line, never veering from the 106th meridian. The 106th meridian will be the astronomical border between day and night, established after the stopping of the sun. To put it simply, the territory trapped between 106° West longitude and 106 ° East longitude, encompassing the eastern part of America, Europe, Africa and a large part of Asia, will be light.

Between 106° East longitude and 106 ° West longitude, where Australia, the Pacific Coast of Asia and the whole Pacific Ocean lie, will be dark. In hours, the Spherical Fish will manage to transform this made-up, imaginary line, dividing darkness from light and day from night, into an actual barrier built of a thin layer of pale green, slightly phosphorescent fog.

According to the latest information, this wall, perpendicular to the earth's surface, will reach the height of the stratosphere – five to six miles at the poles and eleven at the equator. The barrier will possess the qualities of a semi-porous membrane – air and water will flow through it unperturbed. For everything else, however, living or otherwise, it will be impenetrable.

The barrier will be made up of nitrogen, oxygen, hydrogen and carbon, in the same ratio as those elements are found in the human body. The difference will be in the bonds between them – exceptionally strong, in practice turning the barrier into an indestructible wall. Only minutes after its appearance, the trouble will start – dozen of airplanes will smash into it.

Luckily, most of the barrier will pass over oceans or sparsely populated territories. This will limit the number of victims. Only two of the airplanes will crash over densely populated cities, causing serious catastrophes with great numbers killed. One such plane will belong to the Australian airline and will be carrying 150 people on board from Sidney to

Bombay – including the Australian national cricket team, on its way to yet another world championship.

The airplane will crash into the barrier right above Jakarta, it will explode and snap in two. The front half will fall into the new, modern part of the city and will reduce the 18-storey Sony building to ruins, as well as the MacDonald's restaurant next door, plus a canine beauty salon. Six-hundred and fifty people will die on the spot, along with two newly shampooed Afghan hounds and a Riesenschnautzer. Hundreds more will be wounded.

The airplane's tail will land about a dozen kilometers outside Jakarta, in the Port of Tanjung Priok, hitting the Japanese tanker *Fuji*, which unfortunately will be filled up with 100,000 tons of crude oil. The powerful blast will destroy practically the entire port, while the resulting oil slick will set off an ecological catastrophe in the South China Sea.

The second incident will take place above Irkutsk. An An-24 cargo plane transporting 18 cattle of the highly productive Jersey breed will crash and its debris will fall right on top of the local planetarium, which precisely at that moment will be filled with hundreds of fishermen from the Baikal Fisheries Collective, who had come on an organized tour to see that wonder of wonders. The wonder of wonders will surpass their expectations considerably. The few survivors will remember and retell to the end of their days how suddenly dismembered cows started raining down from the cosmos, from between the stars and planets.

Again near Irkutsk, yet another catastrophe will take place at that time – on the Trans-Siberian Railway, the express train to Vladivostok will ram into the barrier. Luckily for the passengers, the train will be moving at such a low speed that most of them will escape only with a rude awakening and minor contusions, suffering during falls from their sleeping berths.

The only casualty will be a middle-aged man masturbating in the restroom of the fifth car. Since he will be clutching a porno magazine in one hand, while pleasuring himself with the other, he will not be grasping the handrail next to him, as will be recommended in the instructions for using the toilet. For this reason, when the train stops abruptly, his unstable body will continue forward by inertia, his eye hitting a nail pounded into the wall across from him. The nail will pass through his eyeball, fatally severing an important cerebral artery.

The victim will be only 4'1" tall – an Honored Artist from the Moscow State Circus, who, along with 15 other dwarves, will be traveling east on a tour. Talk about bad luck – all of this will happen only because the nail, which the employees on the express train use as a

spit on which to skewer the square pieces of newspaper which serve as toilet paper, will be affixed quite low.

While these tragic events will be unfolding in Asia, in the Rocky Mountains Charlie and Jessica will be living through a personal drama no less harrowing. Having snapped out of the hours-long stupefaction that followed the appearance of the Spherical Fish on the horizon, they will begin packing up in a panic and will hop into the SUV which Charlie will have bought not long before on a leasing plan. They have one single, solitary desire – to get back home to Denver as fast as they can.

They will peel out at top speed, but after only a few minutes the pale-green wall will obstruct them. Charlie will naturally think that it is simply fog, so he will slow down and turn on his headlights. His astonishment will be enormous when the SUV rams into the fog and bounces off of it! He will try driving the SUV through the barrier a second time, ramming his bumper up against it. From this position, he will step on the gas, trying to plow through like a bulldozer. But to no avail – the wheels will spin, the car will shake, and Jessica will start screaming hysterically. She will simply go berserk and from that moment until the end of her life she will not be able to utter a single meaningful word. Charlie will realize that he won't be able to get through there and will decide to try somewhere else.

He will ditch the SUV and the screaming Jessica, taking a few tin cans of food and will set out along the barrier. He will try his luck at various points, but the situation is the same everywhere. Charlie will be tenacious, he will walk for a long time, but in the end he will realize that this fog, which stretches as far as his eyes can see, is impenetrable, and that he will never be able to go home to Denver, Colorado.

He will go back to the SUV, where Jessica, hoarse, will continue screaming. He will make numerous attempts to talk to her, but she will be entirely uncommunicative – just screaming and screaming away. Then he will hit her on the head with the jack. Her eyes will roll up into her head and she'll fall silent. Charlie will turn the SUV around and will set off in the opposite direction, to the west. Towards Salt Lake City.

In Salt Lake City, it will be 5:20 when the sun stops and for that reason, when Charlie reaches the city, he will be met by darkness and chaos. He will manage to reach the local radio station, where there will be nobody except one dead-drunk man. The drunk man will seem around fifty years old. He will be stripped to the waist, and his body will be covered in tattoos. That should have been his first day of work as a radio announcer – his life dream,

which the Spherical Fish has ruined. The man will have moved to Salt Lake City from Florida several years earlier. His name will be Val. Charlie will sit in front of the microphone and will agitatedly begin reporting what he has seen on the air. The Spherical Fish and the wall of pale-green fog.

As he is talking, Jessica will come to and will begin screaming. She will get out of the SUV and will run down the dimly lit streets, hollering. At the next intersection, a truck loaded with cantaloupe will suddenly pop out of nowhere at high speed and hit her. Jessica will be mincemeat, while the cantaloupe will spill out over the intersection. The stoplight will be blinking.

Charlie will repeat his story several times – until he will feel that it's enough. Then he will lean over the drunk man and will take the CD he is clutching in his hand. The CD will be a personal, autographed gift from Sven Våth to the dead-drunk Val.

After putting on the CD with music, Charlie will go back out to the street. There he will see that the door of the SUV is open and that Jessica is gone. When he finds her squashed body surrounded by smashed yellow cantaloupes, he will not be able to endure the shocking sight. He will climb up to the roof of the nearest tall building and will jump head-first. His body will be no less squashed than Jessica's. His last thought will be: the end of the world is coming.

“I'm impressed,” says the man with the wire-rim glasses, setting the five sheets of paper he had been reading aloud on top of the pile on the desk in front of him.

“I know,” I reply.

The man with the wire-rim glasses raises his eyes from the papers in surprise, fixing me with an astonished gaze.

“Well, what do you know! Am I hearing things or did you really just say something?”

I keep silent. I'm angry over my hasty words. They were a mistake. The unfamiliar surrounding is hindering my concentration. We're sitting in a spacious room that resembles an aquarium – one of its walls is glass and on the other side I can see a young woman talking on the phone. I can't hear anything – the glass wall seems to be excellently sound-proofed.

“So,” he says slowly, tapping the eraser of the pencil he is holding on the desk, “you can talk now? If you want to talk, I mean...”

That's how it is. If I want to, I can talk. If I don't want to, I can't.

"This is good news," he bubbles. "Very good news... To be frank, I wasn't expecting this... Even though I was really hoping our meeting today would not be yet another monologue on my part... Well, what do you know! You really surprised me!"

I remain indifferent to his delight and he continues: "It will be very important for me to clarify, for myself personally, how exactly to take what you've written. You're following me, right?"

To a point.

"I hope you're following me... I think things have finally gotten off the ground" – he pats the pile of papers, which he has assiduously straightened up in the meantime. "Perhaps I seem a bit overexcited to you after this impromptu literary reading, but what you've written is the only form of communication between yourself... and us... in several... recently."

Silence is also a form of communication.

"And so, what is it? A story?"

I keep silent.

"I know that you want to become a writer. Not that I'm any huge expert in that field, but I think you have... the imagination, a sense for details and so on... you're a good storyteller... I'm really very happy that you're talking now..."

"No," I say.

"No what?"

"No, it's not a story."