

If, on a certain evening about sixty-six million years ago, you had stood somewhere in North America and looked up at the sky, you would have soon made out what appeared to be a star. If you watched for an hour or two, the star would have seemed to grow in brightness, although it barely moved. That's because it was not a star but an asteroid, and it was headed directly for Earth at about forty-five thousand miles an hour. Sixty hours later, the asteroid hit. The air in front was compressed and violently heated, and it blasted a hole through the atmosphere, generating a supersonic shock wave. The asteroid struck a shallow sea where the Yucatán peninsula is today. In that moment, the Cretaceous period ended and the Paleogene period began.

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