

*A Blowing Dust Advisory is in place starting at 11am until 8pm today with visibilities reduced to less than a mile at times. A Red Flag warning is in place from 11am to 11pm with fire danger increasing because of the strong winds and low humidity. No outdoor burning today. And a Wind Advisory is in place today from 9am until 8pm, so make sure to secure any loose items you might have outdoors. ([YakTriNews.com](http://YakTriNews.com))*

It was noon when we saw the first signs: a billowing plume of black smoke; tumbleweeds flying every which way; trails of dust slithering perpendicular to the interstate; and a blood-red sun, hazy from the darkening sky.

The weather change was a drastic departure from the first half of our drive. We had left early – 7 am or so – to cloudy skies above our Montana campsite. We had just spent four days camping and soaking up the last rays of the summer sun before school began. I was in a car with one of my housemates and another friend, while the other four members of our crew drove another vehicle.

As we approached Ritzville (WA), we got a call from one of the girls in the other car, warning us that we'd be driving into a storm and visibility would get worse as we drove west. We told her we'd seen the early signs of the storm and wished them safe travels before hanging up. We had switched drivers in Spokane, so I was in the driver's seat for whatever was coming. I felt comfortable we'd be okay, as I had many experiences driving through dicey conditions back in the Midwest. Little did we know what lay in store.

We saw it just a few miles past Ritzville: the yellow-tinged cloud, hanging over the horizon. As we drove into the haze, it felt like we'd been transported to Mars or Venus. The landscape was tinted orangish, the sun now hidden by the ethereal sky. Eastbound traffic continued to flow and visibility remained relatively clear, so we journeyed on.

“This is crazy,” my friend said, looking out at the apocalyptic sky.

“At least our visibility is fine for now,” the other friend said.

As if on cue, a wave of dust blanketed the road, dropping the visibility to nothing – a “brownout.” I quickly slowed down and turned the Prius's brights on, hoping they'd help with visibility. They didn't. Regardless, we drove on slowly, unable to see more than five feet in front of the car. Thankfully, the dust passed quickly and we were able to continue on, albeit much more slowly than before. I turned on my emergency flashers, figuring the extra lights would help us remain visible to the cars around us.

The brown blizzard of dust and smoke raged outside the car. It felt like we were in Mad Max, driving through a barren wasteland. We kept driving, the Prius shaking in the wind, and small mountains of sand began to accumulate in the window cracks. Visibility had improved for a couple minutes, but we quickly hit another wall of brown. We were driving at 15 miles per hour or so when a pair of red lights – glowing like embers – appeared in front of us. I slammed the brakes, the Prius skidding and squealing to a stop.

“OH SHIT!” my housemate yelled from the backseat, scared by the whiplash.

“That was close,” my friend in the passenger seat whispered, shaken by our near collision with a pull-behind camper trailer just three feet ahead of us.

“We’re not out of this yet,” I shuddered, looking back to see if anyone was behind us. We were sitting ducks. I threw the transmission into park and started pumping the brakes as fast as I could, hoping the flashing brake lights would alert anyone driving up behind us to our presence.

“Oh no, someone cou–,” my housemate started to say as the realization sunk in.

“Exactly,” I said, pumping the brakes at breakneck speed.

“HONK THE HORN!” my friend yelled.

“Will cars even hea–,” I started to say before my friend reached across the car and layed on the horn.

“IT DOESN’T MATTER. JUST DO IT!” she shouted back over the horn, frantically looking back as I took over honking. My right foot and right hand were a blur, simultaneously laying on the break and horn.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

A car emerged from the dust, its lights piercing through the brown wall behind us. It zipped left of us, missing us by mere feet. As it passed, their red brake lights flashed and–CRUNCH! The car violently slammed to a stop. We couldn’t see who they’d hit, but the sickening crunch was telling enough for us.

“KEEP HONKING!”

“I AM!”

Tick. Tock.

“WE’RE SCREWED!”

“ARE YOU STILL BRAKING?”

“YEAH!”

Tick. Tock.

“WHAT IF A SEMI COMES?”

“OH GOD, I HOPE NOT!”

Tick. Tock.

“CAN YOU PULL OVER TO THE SHOULDER?”

Tick. Tock.

“CAN YOU SEE THE SHOULDER?” I shouted back, looking over to the right to see how much space there was. It seemed wide enough, and would get us off the main road. “I can probably fi–,” I started to say when another car emerged from the abyss behind us and pulled up to a safe stop next to us on the shoulder – right where I had almost pulled off.

“So much for that option,” my housemate said.

Twin headlights appeared in the rearview mirror. A car had stopped behind us during our frenzied few seconds debating moving to the shoulder. As the dust continued to swirl outside, we caught a glimpse of a second car that had stopped behind us. We now had at least a two car buffer of parked cars between us and the abyss.

“Whew,” my housemate exhaled before settling back into a more relaxed position in the backseat.

“Agreed,” my friend said. “That was close.”

“Too close,” I said, my knuckles still clenched to the steering wheel.

Next to us, a few people had gotten out of their vehicles to assess the damage that lay ahead of us. We'd seen the one car drive past us and rear-end someone, but we didn't know the extent of what happened. We stayed in the Prius, none of us wanting to walk amidst the maelstrom of dust and smoke.

A woman approached us and motioned for us to roll the window down. We put our masks on and briefly rolled down the passenger window, which was semi-protected from the wind.

"How's it look out there?" I asked.

"Well, there's probably a ten car pileup of wrecked vehicles just two cars ahead of you," she shouted through the storm. "You might pull off to the shoulder if you get a chance so the ambulance can eventually get through."

"Thanks," my friend said before rolling up her window. "We should probably call the other car and make sure they're okay," she said, grabbing her phone. Luckily, they picked up on the first ring and shared that they were safe. My friend shared our situation before hanging up.

"Thank goodness they're not part of the crash," my housemate said.

Five minutes passed.

Ten minutes passed.

As the realization that we'd be stuck here for hours sunk in, the three of us settled in for the long wait, grabbing books, headphones, or just closing our eyes to rest. Just as we got comfortable, though, the red tail lights of the trailer ahead of us turned on. The trailer started moving towards the shoulder, so I turned the Prius on and followed. I expected he was just pulling off to allow space for emergency vehicles, but he continued driving, skirting around the wreckage. As we slowly followed him along the shoulder, we caught glimpses of the wreckage obstructing the interstate. Smashed cars, broken glass, and huddled groups of scared-looking people painted a tragic picture. We all let out a shaky breath of relief that we were spared from the wreckage. The trailer soon turned onto the clear road and drove off, the visibility slightly clearer. We followed, but kept our distance.

As we drove on, my housemate checked the Washington DOT Twitter page to see if they had any reports, and sure enough, they had closed down the interstate where we had been stopped. We wouldn't learn until later that they didn't reopen the road until 7:30pm, almost 7 hours after we were able to skirt around the crash and continue our drive home.

As we drove out of the storm, the chilling image of the wreckage stuck with us. We'd been extremely lucky to avoid the horrific pile-up of cars and the long wait for the interstate to reopen. In George, we switched drivers again, as I was emotionally and physically drained from the ordeal. The sky remained a moody yellow as we continued the journey home, but ran into no more holdups. That is, until we reached bumper-to-bumper traffic in Cle Elum.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.