Storm of the Century

I will never forget that horrible day in January, 1994. The forecast mentioned rain, which in Southern California, the average was not a lot. The weather person had no idea, nor could have predicted what came later that day. I will be put to the test of my driving experiences, and knowledge in general, with some common sense. This was the worst storm Santa Barbara had ever seen in the last century.

I worked for a delivery company called Courier USA, which made deliveries throughout the county of Santa Barbara. My job description entailed phone orders, dispatcher, and a fill-in substitute driver.

My day started out terrible, when Rob the driver, did not show up for work that January morning. I had to cover the route. I wanted a clean and well running vehicle. When I looked around all that was left was a Geo Metro car. I really did not care for this type of vehicle, because I felt unsafe; it reminded me of a small tin can on wheels. The good point was it had great gas mileage. Most of the company vehicles looked delapidated as if someone had abandoned them. The outside was covered with scratches and scatter dents. It had seen better days. You can see the thick coat of dirt and grease, because no one had the time to wash it off. You can see the leftover food containers, empty water bottles, or soda cans stuffed under the seats. When you sit inside some of these cars you can smell stale cigarettes from the ash trays,
and cigarette burns on the carpet. Ruben, the mechanic, did his best to keep up with all the repairs and help keep the vehicles clean. The only problem was the drivers forgot to tell him of the minor problems that eventually turned into larger problems. My route started from Santa Barbara, but my first delivery began in Santa Maria, and ended in Paso Robles. Other delivery towns included San Luis Obispo, Morro Bay, Atascadero, and sometimes Cambria. The route is about 400 miles round trip.

My main deliveries for the day were 10 bags measuring 3ft. x 2.5 ft., weighing 15 lbs to 25 lbs, carrying processed film from Fuji, or Kodak that came from one of the processing centers, located in Orange County. The job was simple; all we had to do was pick-up and deliver the film to department stores such as, Wal-Mart, Longs Drugs, and other independent small photo shops. Then return to the office with the unprocessed film where Richard, our night time driver, delivered them to the processing center. Other deliveries on the route included ADP and PAYCHEX. They process payroll for large or small companies. On-time deliveries for these were a serious matter. Any delays would cause numerous phones calls with upset customers, asking about when their payroll will be delivered. You do not want to face a group of angry, and anxious employee’s telling you they been waiting all afternoon. On top of your regular deliveries you might have additional packages added to your already tight schedule. In the courier busy, that means every delivery is “urgent” therefore, we find ourselves pushing the petal to the metal.

As I was making my last few deliveries and pickups, I noticed more rain drops were coming down fast, and the wind whipping the rain around making it difficult to see. As I’m driving to make my deliveries, you can see the water rising in the streets, as if the water drains were full. My customers were informing me that the California Highway Patrol (CHP) was
considering closing down the highway due to flooding in certain parts of the 101. I started to panic about getting stuck, plus I didn’t have the extra money to spend for a hotel room. I also thought about the film I had, knowing Richard would be waiting for my return, plus I wanted to get home where I know it was warm and safe.

My journey back looked grim; I still had 90 miles to travel through this unbelievable weather I have ever witnessed. As I continued south on the 101 highway, the rain was coming down in buckets making the driving in this GEO Metro impossible to control, especially when large cars, or trucks pass me by, sending huge waves of water onto the windshield making it difficult to see. As a caution driver, I did not want to hydroplane and cause an accident, so I had to ease off the gas pedal. As I was driving along my windshield wipers stopped working. Within seconds I could not see, and immediately pulled over to the side of the highway. It felt like my heart stopped for a second, panic kicked in, as a blurry view of the highway quickly disappeared before me. I found myself with no working wipers. I could not believe what was happening to me. I tried turning the switch off and on several times, while praying that they will work. My prayer was not answered. My mind was racing with the thought of how am I going to get back to the office. I was stranded on the side of the road, 90 miles away from where Richard was expecting me, and a city only a mile or two behind me. The only communication device I had was a company pager. Cell phones were a luxury and expensive to own. I did not want to walk in this weather to try to find an emergency call box somewhere along the highway. I felt this was dangerous. I was more desperate then scared, so I got out of the car walked around to the passenger side. I tried moving the wipers back and forth several times by hand, thinking perhaps they were stuck. I was right! The wipers started to work, again. I started to cry, but this was a happy cry. I did not care if my clothes were soaked through, and my skin was cold. I was just
estatic that the wipers were doing their job. There was the slim possibility that the wipers could stop again, but I did not want to jinks it. The next town was about 20 miles from where I make my emergency stop. As soon as I was able to find a phone booth I called into the office, letting them know I was running behind schedule, and to let Richard know. I also mentioned that the highway might be shut down, and I would call if I could not make it back. My boss, Dennis said, “For me to take care and to do my best.”

After a quick bite to eat, I was anxious to get back to the office. The rain just kept continuing coming down in sheets. I dislike driving in the rain, let alone at night. I started out of San Luis Obispo. Normally during a dry day, the drive to the shop would have taken 90 minutes; instead, it took me twice as long. The road on the highway was being saturated with water. I began driving 50 miles per hour, being very careful not to loose control. While other motorist zoomed by me, others were unpatient and honked at me for driving too slow. I felt the car started to slide sideways. I instantly gripped the steering wheel with both hands and lowered my speed to 40 mph. As the rain continued pooring down, I noticed there were fewer vehicles on the road. When night came, I could hardley see in front of me, my speed dropped down to 35 mph. A half hour away from the shop I saw red lights in the distance. They happened to be other cars and I thought to myself I was not the only fool out in this storm. The roads were badly covered in water that I had to use the center lane. I had to played follow the leader. After three long hours of driving in this herindous weather, I was happy to see Richard. He too, was uncertain how his route was going to turn out. He knew he had to get the film bags to Fuji and Kodak. The next morning, the city of Santa Barbara came to a halt. Both directions of the highways were shut down. The CHP were not letting any vehicles in or out of the city. The Front page of the NewPaper called it the Storm of the century.