

Chapter 1 “The Tornado”

Once upon a time, a **winsome**¹ young orphan named Dorothy lived with her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry on a bleak, **hardscrabble**² Kansas farm. Located about fifty feet from their **Spartan**³ little house was a small underground room called a cyclone cellar, where the family could go in case one of those mighty, house-crushing whirlwinds arose.

Dorothy’s one real joy came from playing with Toto, her little black dog. Toto had long silky hair and small black eyes that twinkled merrily on either side of his funny little nose. Together they frittered away many an afternoon, frolicking among the haystacks in perpetual delight, far beneath the **pellucid**⁴ Kansas skies.

¹ **winsome** If you’re *winsome*, you’re naturally charming, engaging, adorable, winning, etc., and you probably have a childlike innocence, too. The word is used more often to describe a female than a male. *When I told Phil that the new film comedy starred Meg Ryan, he said, “Let me guess; she plays a winsome young woman who finds love, but not until the last five minutes of the movie.”*

² **hardscrabble** This word describes things (towns, farms, land, etc.) that provide very little in return (crops, for example) for much effort. People who live a *hardscrabble* existence (mountainside farmers, for example) barely subsist. *In 1985 Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Russell Baker said, “Goat cheese produced a bizarre eating era when sensible people insisted that this miserable cheese produced by these miserable creatures [raised] on miserable hardscrabble earth was actually superior to the magnificent creamy cheeses of the noblest dairy animals bred in the richest green valleys of the earth.”*

³ **Spartan** If something is *Spartan*, it’s severely simple or restrained. Note: The word is usually capitalized because it refers to the ancient Greek city of Sparta, famous for its strict discipline and strict way of life. *When she saw how the house was decorated (no rugs, no knickknacks, and bare floors), she exclaimed, “This place is as Spartan as a monk’s bedroom!”*

⁴ **pellucid** If something is *lucid* (in the sense of being transparent), it allows light to pass through. But when you refer to something as *pellucid*, you mean that it allows the *maximum possible* amount of light to pass through. *The anti-pollution campaign featured a teary-eyed American Indian standing on a hill beside a pellucid brook.*

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One day, while **hunkered**¹ down to milk a **mottled**² cow, Uncle Henry kept an anxious eye toward an increasingly **ominous**³ sky above. Suddenly seeing the long grass ripple before him, he froze. Now there came a sharp whistling from behind him, and as he turned his head he saw **undulations**⁴ in the grass in that direction also. The usually **phlegmatic**⁵ farmer bolted straight up in alert attention. “There’s a twister coming,

¹ **hunker (hunkered)** To *hunker* is to squat or crouch down. Thus, if you’re hunkered down, you’re squatting down, close to the ground. *The water-skier generally maintained an upright position but hunkered down at each curve and before each jumping ramp.*

² **mottled** If something is *mottled*, it’s spotted or blotched with different colors or shadings. *Our calico cat’s coat was mottled with shades of brown, black, and white.*

³ **ominous** If something is *ominous*, it gives you a feeling that something bad is about to happen. It comes from the word *omen*, which means “a sign that foretells a (usually bad) future event.” *In the 1975 film Jaws, the shark’s appearance is usually signaled (to the audience) by low, ominous music.*

⁴ **undulate (undulations)** If something *undulates*, it moves with smooth, wavelike motions. *Undulations* are these wavelike motions. *Bill avoided dancing at parties because he didn’t like to be seen undulating—or making any uncouth motions, for that matter—in public.*

⁵ **phlegmatic** In the days before modern medicine, it was believed that if you had *phlegm*—that thick mucus that sometimes gets annoyingly stuck in your throat—it caused you to not care too much about things and to be slow or sluggish. Today, if you say someone is *phlegmatic*, you mean that he doesn’t get excited too easily; he’s rather unemotional and indifferent. Note: Dictionaries will tell you that the word is pronounced with a hard *g*, but many people pronounce it with a silent *g*. *On Halloween eve, 1988, journalist David Streitfeld wrote, “According to stereotype, the English are phlegmatic and [imperturbable] souls, which hardly explains the attraction of places like the Chamber of Horrors in Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum or the London Dungeon, [which] combines the technology of Disneyland with the spirit of, well, Jack the Ripper.”*

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Em,” he shouted to his wife. Ever **solicitous**¹ of his livestock, he bolted toward the barn.

With uncommon **alacrity**², Aunt Em dropped her work and ran to the door. One glance at the **lowering**³ sky told her of the coming danger. “Quick, Dorothy!” she shrieked. “Run for the cyclone cellar!”

Galvanized⁴ into action by Aunt Em’s **strident**⁵ **exhortation**⁶, Dorothy grabbed Toto and followed her aunt to

¹ **solicitous** When you’re *solicitous* of (or about) someone, you’re thoughtfully concerned (often anxiously concerned) about his welfare, health, or safety. *Most Americans were solicitous of Lindbergh’s safety during his solo 1927 nonstop flight from New York to Paris.* Note: Don’t confuse this with the word *solicit* that you sometimes see on signs (on buildings) that say “No soliciting.” Those signs basically mean that door-to-door salesmen are not permitted to seek business there.

² **alacrity** When you do something with *alacrity*, you do it right away and speedily (and often with a cheerful willingness). *Our boss said that to him, the perfect employee was one who responded to his orders with politeness and alacrity.*

³ **lowering** This word is a tricky one because it *looks* like it might pertain to being low (as in *low down, close to the ground*). But, in fact, the first syllable (*low*) doesn’t rhyme with “know”; it rhymes with “now.” To *lower* (rhymes with “shower”) is to be dark and threatening. Thus, a *lowering* sky is a dark and threatening one. *American artist Winslow Homer’s most famous painting, The Gulf Stream (1899), shows a man in a small boat struggling against a raging sea beneath a lowering sky.*

⁴ **galvanize (galvanized)** The literal meaning of this word is “to stimulate with an electric current” (and you can imagine how startling that would feel). But people usually use the word figuratively. If something *galvanizes* you, it suddenly arouses you to act. *The Soviets’ successful launch of Sputnik in 1957 galvanized the American government into accelerating its own space program.*

⁵ **strident** A sound described as *strident* is loud and shrill. *While Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev’s early pieces were often harsh and strident, his later works were often pleasing and lyrical.*

⁶ **exhort (exhortation)** When you *exhort* someone, you give him an urgent warning or an urgent piece of advice. An *exhortation* is an act of exhorting or the urgent message itself. *During World War I, Herbert Hoover, then U.S. Food Administrator, exhorted housewives to observe “meatless Mondays” and “wheatless Wednesdays” as food conservation measures.*

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the metal trap door that led to the **sanctuary**¹ of the underground room. But just as she was about to enter, Toto jumped from her arms and scampered back into the house. After running this way and that, he found what seemed to be a safe **haven**²—a spot under the center of Dorothy’s bed.

Not yet appreciating the full power of the storm, and despite her aunt’s hurried **admonitions**³, Dorothy started back to retrieve the little dog from the house, which, framed against the **eerie**⁴, electrified sky, lost its **prosaic**⁵ outlines and became mysterious and threatening. After she had taken only two steps, the tornado descended violently, **decimating**⁶ everything in sight. The wind, tearing past her at ninety miles an hour, seized a sharp-edged shingle from the roof and flung it downward through the air like a guillotine that missed Dorothy’s neck by

¹ **sanctuary** Originally, a *sanctuary* was a church or a part of a church. But now the word can describe any place that offers protection from harm. It can also refer to the immunity from harm the place offers. *Some experts believe that when we sleep curled up in a fetal position, we’re exhibiting an unconscious longing for the sanctuary of the womb.*

² **haven** A *haven* originally meant “a natural harbor used to keep ships safe.” Now the word can be used to refer to any place of safety. *While some of the 13 original colonies gave protection to persecuted religious groups, Georgia was conceived as a haven for English debtors!*

³ **admonition (admonitions)** An *admonition* is a warning or a piece of cautionary advice. The verb is *admonish*. *Most cookbooks admonish the reader to avoid overcooking pasta and vegetables.*

⁴ **eerie** If something is *eerie*, it makes you feel fearful or uneasy, as if some sinister power or mysterious (or even supernatural) force were at work. *At 4:30 a.m. the foggy, deserted metropolis was eerie and fantastic to behold.*

⁵ **prosaic** Prose (ordinary writing) is supposedly less beautiful and imaginative than poetry. So if something (not just writing, but *anything*) is described as *prosaic*, it’s commonplace, ordinary, and run-of-the-mill. *Most UFO sightings have boringly prosaic explanations—reflected sunlight from airplanes, weather balloons, or meteorological phenomena, for example.*

⁶ **decimate (decimating)** This word *originally* referred to the killing (as a punishment for mutiny) of one out of every ten soldiers (chosen by lot). (Note the root *deci*, which refers to “ten.”) But today the word is used to refer to any great loss of life or large-scale destruction. *Experts say that the smoking population will be decimated by lung cancer.*

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mere inches.

Now the wind took hold of the girl and knocked her down. All around her, flying flowerpots, **denuded**¹ branches, and pieces of fence smashed to bits as they struck the ground. She slowly raised herself to her feet, and, **inclining**² her body sharply forward, set out again toward the house. But her flapping dress **hobbled**³ her as it clung to her legs at every step.

With her head down and arms stretched out before her, she stumbled on, feeling her way like a blind girl. After every few steps some unseen flying object appeared from the darkness and struck her. But when she screamed out in fear and pain, her own voice was **obliterated**⁴ by the deafening, insane music of the swirling storm.

With great difficulty she had now crossed the yard, and as she was about to enter the house, the storm made a final **malevolent**⁵ gesture. Two sharp metal gutters, stripped from

¹ **denuded** If something has been *denuded*, it has been stripped bare (of its natural or usual covering). (Note the similarity to the word *nude*.) *Earthquakes and landslides have long ago denuded Italy's Apennines mountains of their original forest cover.*

² **incline (inclining)** An *incline* is a slanted surface. To *incline* something is to slant or angle it. *A helicopter is steered in a particular direction by inclining the axis of the main propeller in that direction.*

³ **hobble (hobbled)** If you've ever tried to walk with your pants around your ankles, you know what it feels like to be *hobbled*. If something *hobbles* you, it doesn't prevent you from walking; it just makes walking difficult. Sometimes a horse's legs are fastened together to prevent free motion; when that happens, the horse has been *hobbled*, and the piece of rope is called a *hobble*. The word can be used figuratively to refer to anything that restrains or hinders. *In 1904 catcher Branch Rickey, hobbled by injuries and by his religious objections to playing on Sundays, was dropped by the Cincinnati Reds.*

⁴ **obliterate (obliterated)** If something is *obliterated*, it's completely wiped out so that there's no trace of it. *Most of the London slums described in Charles Dickens' novels were obliterated by bombing raids during World War II.*

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the roof by a single blast of wind, came flying toward her like parallel spears. Before she knew what had happened, she saw them stick themselves deeply into the ground at her feet!

Now inside the house, she desperately looked for Toto. The wind, which outside the house had maintained a constant course, now swirled around the furniture in a hundred directions and made it impossible for Dorothy to walk in a straight line. She was tossed and battered like a ship in a **maelstrom**¹ until an **erratic**² **vortex**³ caught her and flung her upon her bed, where she lost consciousness.

Then something strange **ensued**⁴. The house, now at the center of the tornado, where the air is somehow strangely still, whirled around two or three times, then started to rise slowly

⁵ **malevolent** Someone (or something) *malevolent* usually has a natural evilness or ill will and will cause (or would like to cause) harm or injury to others. *When she replied that she was on her way to her grandmother's house, Little Red Riding Hood never suspected that the wolf was actually holding malevolent intentions.*

¹ **maelstrom** A *maelstrom* is any large or powerful whirlpool. It's named after an actual whirlpool (named *Maelstrom*) located off the coast of Norway. The word can also be used figuratively to describe any violent or turbulent situation, as in *the maelstrom of war* or *the maelstrom of morning traffic*. *During the 2000 presidential election, the state of Florida became caught in a maelstrom of competing definitions of "clear intent of the voter."*

² **erratic** If something is *erratic*, it lacks consistency, uniformity, or regularity. If something moves *erratically* it doesn't follow a fixed or regular course; it jumps from place to place. *A 1984 article in the London Times said that Academy Award-winning American actress Helen Hayes' "education was erratic, though she learned to add by counting the nightly box office takings."*

³ **vortex** A *vortex* is a swirling mass or column of water or air (especially one that has the power to draw into it whatever surrounds it). The word also can be used figuratively to describe anything (other than swirling water or air) that draws into its center all that surrounds it. *The Broadway actor was eventually swept into the vortex of Hollywood.*

⁴ **ensue (ensued)** To say that some action or activity *ensues* is to say that it happens or takes place (often immediately) as a result or consequence of some prior action or activity. *After Abraham Lincoln was elected President (1860), the South seceded from the Union and the Civil War ensued.*

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through the air like a balloon. Once at the **pinnacle**¹ of the twister's funnel, it was whisked across the boundless **firmament**².

When Dorothy finally regained consciousness she saw that the air in her room was still, but she lay on the bed with Toto beside her until her shattered nerves began to compose themselves. Then she looked out the window and was horrified to see that her house was airborne! It was terribly dark outside, and the wind, which refused to **abate**³, howled horribly.

Dorothy found that in spite of the surrounding **turbulence**⁴, the house was riding quite easily. When several hours had passed without a catastrophe, she settled down a bit, and then, examining her situation, began to seriously **lament**⁵ her

¹ **pinnacle** The *pinnacle* of something is its highest point. The word can refer to a physical high point, but is often used to refer to a figurative high point (as of an achievement, for example). *In his 1963 book The Quiet Crisis, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall said, "We stand today poised on a pinnacle of wealth and power, yet we live in a land of vanishing beauty, of increasing ugliness, of shrinking open space, and of an overall environment that is diminished daily by pollution and noise."*

² **firmament** The word *firmament* can be used as a synonym for *sky* when *sky* is thought of as "the expanse (or great arch) of the heavens." The word can also be used figuratively to mean "highest plane." *Plato, Aristotle, Buddha, and Confucius are stars in the firmament of thought.*

³ **abate** If something (bad weather, conflict, pain, enthusiasm, interest, for example) *abates*, it becomes less intense; it dies down. *The years-old ethnic conflict in areas of the former Yugoslavia showed no signs of abating.*

⁴ **turbulent (turbulence)** If something (air or water movement, or an era, for example) is *turbulent*, it's stormy, agitated, violent, etc. The noun is *turbulence*. *With its civil rights protests, antiwar protests, and assassinations, the decade from 1960–1969 is often referred to by historians as "the turbulent sixties."*

⁵ **lament** If you *lament* something, you feel or express grief or sorrow over it (as in *she lamented her mother's death*). But you don't have to lament *over* something; you can just plain lament (as in *ever since her puppy ran away, all she does is lament*). *In April 1999 journalist Rachel Alexander, speaking of "The Great One," said, "Showing the grace and poise that marked his 20-year NHL career, Wayne Gretzky today made official the retirement hockey fans have been lamenting for days."*

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plight¹. After all, when the house fell again, she and Toto could be smashed to pieces. With a brave but **spurious**² **insouciance**³, she decided to wait and see what would happen next. But the gentle swaying of the house was a **soporific**⁴, and Dorothy finally became drowsy and fell asleep.

¹ **plight** A *plight* is a bad or unfavorable condition or situation. The word is used especially if the situation is trying or unfortunate, as in *the plight of the homeless*. *During the 18th and 19th centuries, many poverty-stricken rural families responded to their plight by migrating to cities.*

² **spurious** To describe something as *spurious* (pronounced *SPYUR-ee-is*) is to say that it lacks authenticity; it's not the genuine article; it's counterfeit, fake, bogus. A *spurious* argument is an illogical one; it leads to a false conclusion. *In March 1990, the Los Angeles Times reported that at a British museum "a spurious 6th-century [stone coffin] was exposed only after someone noticed that it depicted a female figure wearing 19th-century underwear."*

³ **insouciant (insouciance)** Someone who's *insouciant* (pronounced *in-SOO-see-ent*) is carefree, unconcerned, without anxiety. If you remember that the French word *souci* means "care" and that the prefix *in-* means "without," it's easy to remember that *insouciant* means "without care." *Insouciance* is the noun. *According to the Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia, British actor Roger Moore "brought a lightweight insouciance to the role of [fictional secret service agent] James Bond."*

⁴ **soporific** As a noun, a *soporific* is something (a drug or boring speech, for example) that causes you to feel sleepy. As an adjective it means "causing sleepiness." *Cold medicines containing alcohol and antihistamines have a soporific effect.*