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Storm chaser, Dusty Lens, finds therapy in capturing extraordinary photographs of storms across the US Midwest and his hometown of Gravesend and Kent.

Playing with toy soldiers in the garden as a kid, Dusty Lens always looked at clouds. One day, the sky turned black, thunder crashed, and seven-year-old Dusty hid under a blanket on the sofa. A lifelong fascination with storms began. Unaware he was living with three major congenital conditions – Klippel-Feil syndrome (fused neck vertebrae), basilar invagination (brainstem compression), and ventricular septal defect/VSD (a hole in the heart) – Dusty struggled at school. It was not until the age of 30 that a BUPA referral to a neurosurgeon revealed the cause of his pain and exhaustion.

INSPIRED

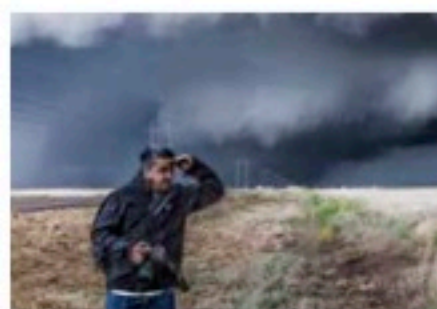
With an engineer's mind, Dusty completed a YTS (Youth Training Scheme) at Fogg & Amp; Young Engineering in Gravesend, but no job came of it.

At 18, while working at Dixons electrical store, he bought his first camera, a Chinon. Soon after, a storm rolled in. He loaded film, propped the camera on cassette cases on his bedroom window, pressed the shutter 24 times, and sent the film off for processing. (For younger readers, photographs had to be developed in a lab!) Two days later, the photos came back, a few blurred, a few bright, but one with a bolt of lightning. Boom, photography became the one constant for him.

TECHNOLOGICAL INFLUENCE

It was the internet, then the Discovery Channel's Storm Chasers, that alerted Dusty to the idea that storm chasing was a thing. By 2013, he was travelling annually to Tornado Alley in the US, from the southern states of Texas and New Mexico, to the northern plains of Montana, South Dakota, and beyond. The US offers vast, open skies, where a single cloud can be seen 180 miles away – the equivalent of spotting a cloud over Bristol from London.

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DANGEROUS PURSUIT

A tornado is a fast-rotating column of air, ranging from under a metre to over a couple of miles wide in exceptional circumstances. Tornadoes come in a few different forms, from cones to wedges to ropes, and the storms usually move south-west to north-east but can change direction with tragic consequences. The arrival of many storm chasers should be seen as an early warning to most towns.

Peak activity begins in the early afternoon. While storm chasing can appear cliquey, there is camaraderie, not rivalry. Chasers tend to share data and warnings, especially as conditions can turn quickly. Disaster can arrive fast. Dusty's closest brush came during a sudden barrage of baseball-sized hailstones that wrote off his hire car in seconds. 'It was like a hundred people beating the car with baseball bats.' The hire company had dozens of damaged cars, but Dusty's was on another level. In time, the focus shifted from lightning to tornado structure and storm form.

Dusty uses wide-angle and zoom lenses, lens filters to balance the light, and radar and modelling to track storm development. 'A rotating thunderstorm, called a supercell, is like a soufflé. All the ingredients must align. Then there's structure, shape, layers, and sometimes a mothership. It's spectacular.'

DYING PLANET

Health continues to deteriorate; pain 24/7. Dusty reflects on his deeper driver: nature. 'We are killing the planet. All humans are basically the same but obsessed with harming one another.'

Storms are a reminder of nature's power and fragility. Each photograph captures contrast, light and dark, chaos and calm. It is the lens through which Dusty sees the world, a therapy that keeps his mind focused. 'If you lose the mind battle, you're screwed.'

And so it comes full circle. The power of a photograph still holds the power to awe, as captured on this newspaper's front page: lightning over Dusty's home town of Gravesend. It is through such images that Dusty hopes people will reflect on the power of nature, its beauty, and the planet.

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