THE FIRST NOVEL FOR TELEVISION BY THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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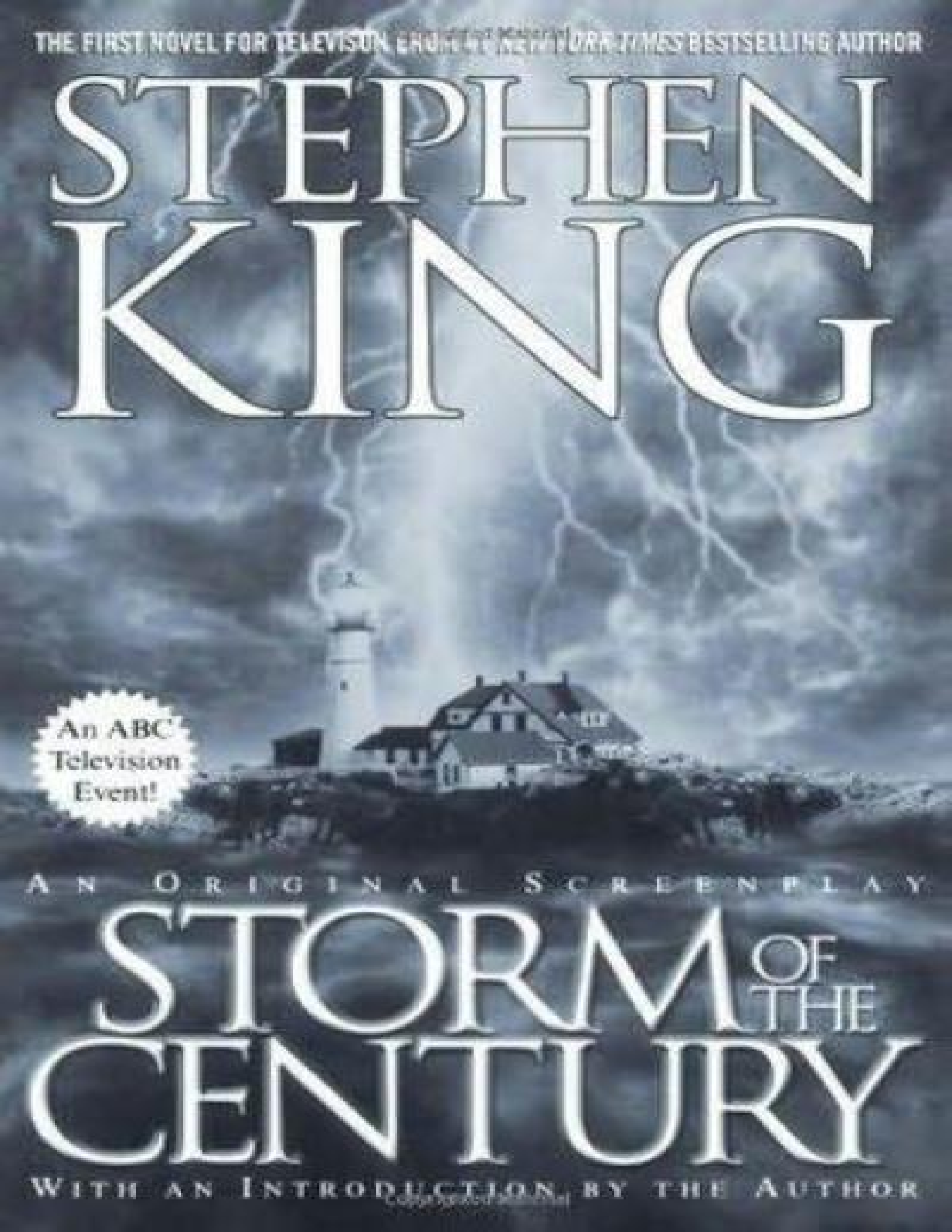

AN ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY

STORM OF THE CENTURY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

STEPHEN KING

STORM OF THE CENTURY

Screenwriter’s Note

The “reach” is a coastal New England term that refers to the stretch of open water between an island and the mainland. A bay is open on one end; a reach is open on two. The reach between Little Tall Island (fictional) and Machias (real) can be supposed to be about two miles wide.

Introduction

In most cases--three or four out of every five, let's say--I know where I was when I got the idea for a certain story, what combination of events (usually mundane) set that story off. The genesis of It, for example, was my crossing a wooden bridge, listening to the hollow thump of my bootheels, and thinking of "The Three Billy Goats Gruff." In the case of Cujo it was an actual encounter with an ill-tempered Saint Bernard. Pet Sematary arose from my daughter's grief when her beloved pet cat, Smucky, was run over on the highway near our house.

Sometimes, however, I just can't remember how I arrived at a particular novel or story. In these cases the seed of the story seems to be an image rather than an idea, a mental snapshot so powerful it eventually calls characters and incidents the way some ultrasonic whistles supposedly call every dog in the neighborhood. These are, to me, at least, the true creative mysteries: stories that have no real antecedents, that come on their own. The Green Mile began with an image of a huge black man standing in his jail cell and watching the approach of a trusty selling candy and cigarettes from an old metal cart with a squeaky wheel. Storm of the Century also started with a jailhouse image: that of a man (white, not black) sitting on the bunk in his cell, heels drawn up, arms resting on knees, eyes unblinking. This was not a gentle man or a good man, as John Coffey in The Green Mile turned out to be; this was an extremely evil man. Maybe not a man at all. Every time my mind turned back to him--while driving, while sitting in the optometrist's office and waiting to get my eyes dilated, or worst of all while lying awake in bed at night with the lights out--he looked a little scarier. Still just sitting there on his bunk and not moving, but a little

scarier. A little less like a man and a little more like . . . well, a little more like what was underneath.

Gradually, the story started to spin out from the man ... or whatever he was. The man sat on a bunk. The bunk was in a cell. The cell was in the back of the general store on Little Tall Island, which I sometimes think of as "Dolores Claiborne's island." Why in the back of the general store? Because a community as small as the one on Little Tall wouldn't need a police station, only a part-time constable to take care of the occasional bit of ugliness--an obstreperous drunk, let us say, or a bad-tempered fisherman who sometimes puts his fists on his wife. Who would that constable be? Why, Mike Anderson, of course, owner and operator of the Anderson's General Store. A nice enough guy, and good with the drunks and the bad-tempered fishermen . . . but suppose something really bad came along? Something as bad, perhaps, as the malignant demon that invaded Regan in The Exorcist? Something that would just sit there in Mike Anderson's home-welded cell, looking out, waiting . . .

Waiting for what?

Why, the storm of course. The storm of the century. A storm big enough to cut Little Tall Island off from the mainland, to throw it entirely upon its own resources. Snow is beautiful; snow is deadly; snow is also a veil, like the one the magician uses to hide his sleight of hand. Cut off from the world, hidden by the snow, my boogeyman in the jail cell (by then I was already thinking of him by his stated name, Andre Linoge) could do great damage. The worst of it, perhaps, without ever leaving that bunk where he sat with his heels up and his arms on his knees.

I had reached this point in my thinking by October or November of 1996; a bad man (or perhaps a monster masquerading as a man) in a jail cell, a storm even bigger than the one that totally paralyzed the northeast corridor in the mid-1970s, a community cast on its own resources. I was daunted by the prospect of creating an entire community (I had done such a thing in two novels, 'Salem's Lot and Needful Things, and it's an enormous challenge), but enticed by the possibilities. I also knew I had reached the

point where I must write or lose my chance. Ideas that are more complete--the majority of them, in other words--will keep a fair length of time, but a story that rises from a single image, one that exists mostly as potential, seems to be a much more perishable item.

I thought the chances that Storm of the Century would collapse of its own weight were fairly high, but in December of 1996 I began to write, anyway. The final impetus was provided by the realization that if I set my story on Little Tall Island, I had a chance to say some interesting and provocative things about the very nature of community . . . because there is no community in America as tightly knit as the island communities off the coast of Maine. The people in them are bound together by situation, tradition, common interests, common religious practices, and work that is difficult and sometimes dangerous. They are also blood-bound and clannish, the populations of most islands composed of half a dozen old families that overlap at the cousins and nephews and inlaws like patchwork quilts.* If you're a tourist (or one of the "summah people"), they will be friendly to you, but you mustn't expect to see inside their lives. You can come back to your cottage on the headland overlooking the reach for sixty years, and you will still be an outsider. Because life on the island is different.

[* In eastern Maine, basketball teams play their season-ending tourney at the Bangor Auditorium, and normal life comes pretty much to a complete stop as folks all over the region listen to the radio broadcasts. One year when the Jonesport-Beals girls' team was in the Class D (Small School) tourney, the radio announcers referred to all five of the starters by their first names. They had to, because all the girls were either sisters or cousins. Every one was a Beals.]

I write about small towns because I'm a small-town boy (although not an island boy, I hasten to add; when I write about Little Tall, I write as an outsider), and most of my small-town tales--those of Jerusalem's Lot, those

of Castle Rock, those of Little Tall Island--owe a debt to Mark Twain (“The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg”) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (“Young Goodman Brown”). Yet all of them, it seemed to me, had a certain unexamined postulate at their center: that a malevolent encroachment must always shatter the community, driving the individuals apart and turning them into enemies. But that has been my experience more as a reader than as a community member; as a community member, I’ve seen towns pull together every time disaster strikes.**

[** In the ice storm of January 1998, for instance, when some communities went without power for two weeks or more.]

Still the question remains: is the result of pulling together always the common good? Does the idea of “community” always warm the cockles of the heart, or does it on occasion chill the blood? It was at that point that I imagined Mike Anderson’s wife hugging him, and at the same moment whispering, “Make [Linoge] have an accident” in his ear. Man, what a chill that gave me! And I knew I would have to at least try to write the story.

The question of form remained to be answered. I don’t worry about it, ever--no more than I worry about the question of voice. The voice of a story (usually third person, sometimes first person) always comes with the package. So does the form an idea will take. I feel most comfortable writing novels, but I also write short stories, screenplays, and the occasional poem. The idea always dictates the form. You can’t make a novel be a short story, you can’t make a short story be a poem, and you can’t stop a short story that decides it wants to be a novel instead (unless you want to kill it, that is).

I assumed that if I wrote Storm of the Century, it would be a novel. Yet as I prepared to sit down to it, the idea kept insisting that it was a movie. Every image of the story seemed to be a movie image rather than a book image: the killer’s yellow gloves, Davey Hopewell’s bloodstained basketball, the kids flying with Mr. Linoge, Molly Anderson whispering

“Make him have an accident” in her husband’s ear, and most of all, Linoge in the cell, heels up, hands dangling, orchestrating it all.

It would be too long for a theatrical movie, but I thought I saw a way around that. I had developed a wonderful working relationship with ABC over the years, providing material (and sometimes tele-plays) for half a dozen so-called miniseries that had done quite well in the ratings. I got in touch with Mark Carliner (who produced the new version of The Shining) and Maura Dunbar (who has been my creative contact at ABC since the early nineties). Would either of them, I asked, be interested in a real novel for television, one that existed as its own thing rather than being based on a preexisting novel?

Both of them said yes with hardly a pause, and when I finished the three two-hour scripts that follow, the project went into preproduction and then to film with no creative dithering or executive megrims at all. It is fashionable to shit on television if you’re an intellectual (and for God’s sake, never admit that you watch Frasier, let alone Jerry Springer), but I have worked as a writer in both TV and the movies, and I subscribe to the adage that in Hollywood, TV people want to make shows and movie people want to make lunch reservations. This isn’t sour grapes; the movies have been pretty good to me, by and large (let’s just ignore such films as Graveyard Shift and Silver Bullet). But in television, they let you work . . . plus if you have a history of some success with multipart dramas, they let you spread a little, too. And I like to spread. It’s a beautiful thing. ABC committed thirty-three million dollars to this project on the basis of three first-draft scripts, which were never significantly changed. That was also a beautiful thing.

I wrote Storm of the Century exactly as I would a novel, keeping a list of characters but no other notes, working a set schedule of three or four hours every day, hauling along my Mac PowerBook and working in hotel rooms when my wife and I went on our regular expeditions to watch the Maine women’s basketball team play their away games in Boston, New

York, and Philadelphia. The only real difference was that I used a Final Draft screenwriting program rather than the Word 6 program I use for ordinary prose (and every now and then the damned program would crash and the screen would freeze--the new Final Draft program is blessedly bug-free). And I would argue that what follows (and what you'll see on your TV screen if you watch Storm when it airs) isn't really a "TV drama" or a "miniseries" at all. It is a genuine novel, one that exists in a different medium.

The work was not without its problems. The main drawback to doing network TV is the censorship question (ABC is the one major network that still maintains an actual Standards and Practices arm; they read scripts and tell you what you absolutely cannot show in the living rooms of America). I had struggled mightily with this issue in the course of developing The Stand (the world's population strangles to death on its own snot) and The Shining (talented but clearly troubled young writer beats wife within an inch of her life with a croquet mallet, then attempts to bludgeon son to death with the same implement), and it was the absolute worst part of the process, the creative equivalent of Chinese foot-binding.

Happily for me (the self-appointed guardians of America's morality are probably a lot less happy about it), network television has broadened its spectrum of acceptability quite a bit since the days when the producers of The Dick Van Dyke Show were forbidden to show a double bed in the master bedroom (dear God, what if the youth of America began indulging fantasies of Dick and Mary lying there at night with their legs touching?). In the last ten years the changes have been even more sweeping. A good deal of this has been in response to the cable-TV revolution, but much of it is the result of general viewer attrition, particularly in the coveted eighteen to twenty-five age group.

I have been asked why bother with network TV at all when there are cable outlets like Home Box Office and Showtime, where the censorship issue is negligible. There are two reasons. The first is that, for all the critical sound and fury surrounding such original cable shows as Oz and The Real

World, the potential cable-TV audience is still pretty small. Doing a mini on HBO would be like publishing a major novel with a small press. I have nothing at all against either small presses or cable TV, but if I work hard over a long period of time, I'd like a shot at the largest possible audience. Part of that audience may elect to switch away on Thursday night to watch ER, but that's the chance you take. If I do my job and people want to see how matters turn out, they'll tape ER and hang in there with me. "The exciting part is when you've got some competish," my mother used to say.

The second reason to stick with a major network is that a little foot-binding can be good for you. When you know your story is going under the gaze of people who are watching for dead folks with open eyes (a no-no on network TV), children who utter bad words (another no-no), or large amounts of spilled blood (a gigantic no-no), you begin to think of alternative ways of getting your point across. In the horror and the suspense genres, laziness almost always translates into some graphic crudity: the popped eyeball, the slashed throat, the decaying zombie. When the TV censor takes those easy scares away it becomes necessary to think of other routes to the same goal. The filmmaker becomes subversive, and sometimes the filmmaker becomes actually elegant, as Val (Cat People) Lewton's films are often elegant.

The above probably sounds like a justification, but it's not. I am, after all, the guy who once said I wanted to terrify my audience, but would horrify it if I couldn't achieve terror . . . and if I couldn't achieve horror, I'd go for the gross-out. What the fuck, I'd say, I'm not proud. Network TV has, in a manner of speaking, taken away that ultimate fallback position.

There are some visceral moments in Storm of the Century--Lloyd Wishman with the axe and Peter Godsoe with his rope are just two examples--but we had to fight for every one of them, and some (where five-year-old Pippa scratches her mother's face and screams "Let me go, you bitch!" for example) are still under strenuous discussion. I'm not the most popular person at Standards and Practices these days--I keep calling people and whining, threatening to tell my big brother if they don't stop teasing me