

# Segue

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online literary journal

## JAMES SEPSEY



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## Scanners

I was on my way to return *Scanners* when I first saw the man in the overcoat. I had only watched part of the movie, the part where the two men have the scanner duel and one blows up the other's head. I was going to ask the clerk at the video store if they had any kind of guarantee on movies that you enjoyed in high school but when you watched them twenty years later the novelty had worn off. I thought that would be a funny thing to ask. And that was how I felt about *Scanners*.

The man in the overcoat actually looked like a character out of *Scanners*. Which seemed so typical of my life. Balding, thick glasses, a mustache, an overcoat, burgundy slacks. He didn't stalk me or expose himself, which was nice. He kept a safe distance and stood motionless under the marquee of the movie theater. In our town we have just one movie theater, still with its original marquee from the 1930s, still with just one screen.

I watched the man watch me enter the video store. Without looking outside I told the video-store clerk there was a man in an overcoat watching me from across the street, under the marquee of the movie theater. When the clerk looked out the window there was no one there. I then looked out to confirm this. And soon let it go.

*Scanners* did not age well, I said.

The clerk raised a hand over his head and said he begged to differ. He said *Scanners* was one of David Cronenberg's most stunning achievements. The older, he said of Cronenberg, the better. Then added that *The Fly* was the beginning of the end.

Then you'll remember *Rabid*, I said, Cronenberg's first film.

Actually *Shivers* came before that, he said.

I didn't remember *Shivers* but I wasn't about to let my guard down to some know-it-all nineteen-year-old. I played along like I knew that *Shivers* had come first and I'd just mixed the two films up. I was one of the few girls in high school who watched horror films. My boyfriends were frightened by the videos I would bring over. But if they couldn't stomach *my* movies, good riddance.

In eighth grade I even used to write and edit my own little horror magazine, *Graphic Violence*. I'd type out reviews to all the horror movies I'd watch on HBO. Thanks to HBO I was able to see the R-rated horror films that my parents would never take me to see at the theater. This would have been where I first saw *Scanners*. Someone at school who'd seen it in Los Angeles told us all that a guy's head explodes. There was nothing else in this world I wanted to see more than that.

Doesn't even look like you watched the whole thing, the clerk said.

I asked what he was talking about.

He showed me the videocassette that I had neither watched to the end nor rewound. My goose was cooked.

I should probably give it another chance, I said.

He agreed that would be the thing to do. He said he wouldn't charge me to re-rent it. It was on him so long as I watched it through to the end. I promised to do that.

When I left the video store I didn't see the man in the overcoat. It would be over a week before our second, closer encounter.

That night I had the first of many migraines. I'd had my share of headaches before, but never so severe, the type that make you nauseous. I momentarily joked that the man I had seen in the overcoat was a scanner who had accessed my mind. After the third migraine in less than a week I didn't find that notion so funny anymore.

During the week I managed to watch *Scanners* almost thirty-four times. I called out sick for work one day and watched it almost eleven times in a row. I couldn't tell you anything about the plot or characters—but the gore certainly aroused me. When it came time to return the video I couldn't bring myself to do it.

I called the video store and spoke with the clerk. I told him I wanted to buy the videocassette of *Scanners*. He said he couldn't sell it because it was the only copy in the store, kind of a collector's item. He said he could get it for me on DVD but I said I didn't want it on DVD. I liked handling the videocassette. I liked opening the brown plastic box and running my fingers over the dust in the ridges. I was nostalgic for this particular copy and wanted no other version. I decided I would keep it.

A few days later I felt guilty and decided to return the video. On the way I saw the man in the overcoat, under the marquee of the movie theater reading a newspaper. For whatever reason I wasn't afraid of him anymore. I returned the videocassette and decided to go and meet him.

I crossed the street and when he saw me coming he folded his newspaper and put it in his pocket. I said hello and he took off his hat and bowed to me. He had on black gloves that I hadn't noticed before. I told him my name and he said it was a nice name. He did not tell me his. He asked me to put out my hand. When I did he pretended to put something in it. Then he squeezed it shut and said not to open my hand unless I saw no other way out. When I asked him what he meant he put his hat back on, made his way down the sidewalk, around a corner, and was gone. I would never see him again.

That night the migraines returned. For dinner I had planned to only eat two pieces of sourdough toast, no butter, and a plum, but as the migraine worsened I started looking for other things to eat. I ate bacon and a bowl of Life, then decided I had to have a steak. But I didn't have a steak so I drove to the butcher and bought a three-pound filet mignon. When I got home I cooked it in olive oil with a little garlic but I couldn't wait for it to finish so I ate it half-raw, like Mia Farrow as Rosemary in *Rosemary's Baby*. And after all that I still had a migraine.

I knew I had to see *Scanners* again. I had to go back and rent the exact same copy I'd just returned. I had to watch it again and exorcise the pain from my brain. After all I'd eaten I was still famished. I put a handful of Triscuits in my purse, some salami, and headed out. Each step made me dizzier, more nauseous. I tried to open my eyes as little as possible—the tiniest strand of light made me want to puke.

I got to the video store a little after ten. They were already closed. I looked inside and saw my young clerk. I tapped on the door. He saw me and waved, came to the door and opened it. I stepped inside and he told me he was closed and I told him I knew that. I just need to rent *Scanners* again, I said. And I'll pay for it this time. Handsomely. He reached behind his neck to scratch it. Then he brought his free hand over and gripped the elbow of his scratching hand. Then he said, You know what—someone tried to rent it just before we closed. And for some reason I told him no, I just knew you'd be back. I asked my young clerk to explain this someone. I don't know, he said, he was bald, had glasses, an overcoat. Kind of creepy and intense.

As my clerk went after the video I looked out the window and saw what I thought were snowflakes. But they couldn't be snowflakes—not in July. When I got a closer look I could see they were ashes. Falling from the sky. From the clouds. In place of rain. They were sticking to the window like snowflakes and sliding down leaving sooty streaks on the glass. I looked at my young video clerk and he just shrugged. I don't know what the hell is happening to this world, he said. I rented the video. We said goodbye.

When I got home I put on *Scanners* and poured a glass of beer. I watched the movie and sipped my beer and started to feel relieved. But as soon as the movie was over the migraine returned. I rewound the movie, watched it again.

On the third viewing the videocassette broke. Long loops of videotape came spilling out of my VCR. I pulled the videocassette out and watched in horror as the tape snapped. There was no way to put it back together. No way to ever see it again.

I sat on the couch as the migraine returned. My temples throbbed and a wave of nausea washed over me. I thought about the man in the overcoat. I thought about what he had put in my hand, how he had said to never open it unless I saw no other way out.

I saw no other way out.

I opened my hand and found nothing there. I took it and put it in my mouth. I swallowed it and lay on the couch. The migraine was gone. I shut my eyes and felt my way through a warm fog of blood. I went to places I would never see again. I walked high above the ashes.

## Author Notes

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*James Sepsey's work has appeared in Glimmer Train, McSweeney's Internet Tendency, and Senses of Cinema. He once received a very warm and encouraging rejection letter from Zoetrope: All-Story. These days he teaches high-school English.*

### About the Work

One day I read George Saunders's "The Barber's Unhappiness." It was in *The New Yorker* and I remember thinking there needed to be a comma between "Mornings" and "the barber." The story begins: "Mornings the barber left his stylists outside and sat out front of his shop..." I dwelled on this for several months. The more I read Saunders the more I realized how punctuation acted like rests in music: halves, wholes, quarters, so on.

I still dwell on this. But it taught me the virtues of dwelling. This story began with someone returning a copy of *Scanners*. I had no idea who. The man in the overcoat sounded funny to me. So there he was. The initial conflict of the story concerned the video-store clerk and the protagonist; later it became more fantastical: a severe migraine, a supernatural mystery, and so on.

I was nostalgic for videocassettes, which might explain my preference for the videocassette format over DVD. I was also thinking of the stories of John Collier (from his collection *Fancies and Goodnights* mostly) and the episode of *The Twilight Zone* where Nan Adams sees the hitchhiker and finally learns to overcome her fear of death. Mainly because she is already dead.

As usual, the ending was the most difficult. What did the man in the overcoat give the woman? How would it be used in the end? It was that idea of Chekhov's gun: If you show a gun in the first act, use by the third. What he left out was: Make sure the gun is loaded when the time comes to fire it. I sometimes forget to do that.

### James Sepsey on the Web

[www.glimmertrain.com/issue64fall.html](http://www.glimmertrain.com/issue64fall.html)

[www.mcsweeneys.net/links/newfood/](http://www.mcsweeneys.net/links/newfood/) (You will need to scroll for several days.)

[archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/04/becker.html](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/04/becker.html)

[jackendarvis.blogspot.com/search?q=James+Sepsey](http://jackendarvis.blogspot.com/search?q=James+Sepsey)

[www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/ask/2008/12/questions-for-treisman.html](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/ask/2008/12/questions-for-treisman.html)