

CAN YOU WATCH MY STUFF

Rich Larson

The author tells us he's hard at work on *Cypher*, the sequel to his debut novel *Annex*. After reading Rich's latest tale, it would not be surprising to feel a little trepidatious the next time someone says . . .

CAN YOU WATCH MY STUFF

The heat's barbaric this summer, weeks of thirty-seven degrees at 80 percent humidity, a thick muggy haze that coats you in sweat the second you step out the door. Thank fuck for coffee shops. The one I'm working in is corporate and soulless and airy and well lit, and the A/C is blasting at absolutely arctic temperatures, cold enough to slice through my heat daze.

But the screenplay is still going nowhere. I'm in the very back of the shop, sipping on a chocolate milk loaded with ice cubes and staring at my open document. The sweat blot on the small of my back is turning slimy. The gritty noir detective story is turning into absolute shit.

"Scuse."

The girl in my peripherals has moved to right in front of me. I noticed her earlier because she's got what might be a homeless tan going on, plus thick dirty dreads, but mostly because she's wearing a puffy orange winter coat even though it's hellish hot. I brace myself while trying not to look like I'm bracing myself, and pluck one earbud out.

"Allo," I say.

"I have to use the bathroom," she says, switching right over to English, no accent, with a shit-eating grin on her face. "Can you watch my stuff?"

I glance at her table, expecting to see a big camping backpack resting against the chair. Instead she's got a gunmetal gray laptop plugged into the outlet and also into some kind of portable speaker. She has a loopy look in her eyes that unnerves me on the cellular level, you know, that weird instinctual flash you get when someone seems not quite right in the head. But I figure everybody's a little odd this summer, a little off, brains pressure-cooked by the damp heat.

"Sure thing," I say, honoring the ancient social contract of pretending to keep an eye on someone's laptop in a coffee shop while they piss even though nobody's going to run into a Starbucks and grab a random laptop, and if they did it's not like I would

leap up and tackle them. I don't ask her why she's wearing a parka.

Back to my document. I start tapping my fingers on the table, timing them to the little blinking rod that indicates where I would be typing if I were typing. What's that thing called, anyway? I have to Google it, and then I remember I was going to Google interrobangs, so I do that too. I manage to close the tab just before I get sucked down the Wikipedia rabbit hole.

Back to my document. I look around the coffee shop and count pit stains. The girl in the winter coat is still in the bathroom. My eyes wander over to her open laptop, because at least it's got something interesting on the screen, something that looks like swirling code, numbers and symbols moving in a murmur.

The thing that I thought was a charging speaker starts to vibrate. I glance toward the bathroom, wondering if she's getting a call on her laptop, thinking maybe I'll tell her when she gets out even though she'll see the missed call anyways. It would be proof, I suppose, that I was keeping a weather eye out.

The vibration kicks up a notch, enough to rattle the table and startle a passing barista. Then the laptop screen starts to bubble. I blink, because it must be a heat hallucination thing. It bulges outward off the laptop, swelling convex, and the distorted lines of code start to glow bright blue. I'm thinking maybe it's a bomb, maybe she is bombing the coffee shop because it claims to be fair trade but probably isn't. My hand gropes on auto for my phone to either dial 911 or to tweet about it.

The laptop implodes with a thunderclap of static, leaving a ragged glowing blue hole the size of my fist in the air. Somebody shouts *what the fuck*, and I think, *interrobang*. Everybody in the shop has their phones out recording. I have a primo angle, so I should really be doing that too, but I'm frozen by the weirdness of it all and thinking how the girl in the bathroom is going to be so chapped about her laptop.

Something pokes out of the blue hole, bone-white, conical, sharp at the tip. People gasp. It flexes around and retreats. I'm thinking I should back up, because I am closest to the blue hole and still sweat-stuck to my chair, when the rest of the thing comes wriggling out. There's something avian about it. It's bony and bulbous at the same time, lots of slick white flesh plastered in what might be wet feathers, lots of spiny many-jointed limbs. The thing slops onto the coffee shop tiles and then slowly stands up, trembling like a baby horse.

I look around, to make sure everyone is seeing the same thing and I'm not having a stroke, and end up making eye contact with an old lady still clutching her frappuccino in one hand. She crosses herself with the other.

"First contact," says a teenager in a bright red hoodie who is slinking closer to the thing with his phone angled just right, ready to rack up so many hits. "We are deadass making first contact with an alien in a Starbucks."

Man, I hate it when people say deadass.

The thing takes a shaky step forward, away from me, into the middle of the coffee shop. The teen gets right up close to it, and the slick white flesh along the thing's back peels open, weirdly pretty, like a flower blooming. The inside is ribbed red and I see a ropey tendon or something squeaking and sliding, and serrated rows of white bone or else whatever teeth are made of. Dentine, maybe? I get the idea that the tendon is winching them, or winding them up, right as the teenager slinks in for a close-up.

Everything happens fast: the thing snatches him up with two of its bony limbs, he yelps, there's a whining scraping sound, and the serrated rows start whirring like an organic chainsaw, he yelps again, the thing slams him into its mouth or maimer or whatever it is, and bright red blood geysers all over the place. His gore-clotted phone spins past my face; it's a Samsung.

"*Tabarnac*," says the old lady.

Total chaos. The people who had been hovering around the door and windows,

drawn by the commotion, get bowled over by people running like hell. The old lady hurls her frappuccino at the thing, which is a nice gesture. A dozen drinks get spilled simultaneously and a business-guy slips on one and falls on his ass with a nasty cracking sound. The barista is yammering into his phone to someone who is hopefully the police.

And I'm still sitting, not because I am brave, but because I am a huge fucking coward, and the blood flying everywhere has basically turned my kneecaps into grape jelly. The monster finishes sundering its first victim into ribbons and swallows, a peristalsis that makes its whole body swell and contract. I can't tell where its eyes are if it's even got them, but I finally snap out of it long enough to dive off my seat and hide under the table.

The thing is between me and the exit and everyone else is out, even the limping businessman. It raises itself a little higher, and I see a bunch of gill-like things quiver and flare. There's a deep awful sniffing noise. I don't think it's smelling for hand-roasted Colombian coffee beans. It turns back toward me and I won't lie, I give up a little trickle of pee.

Distractions. I need a distraction. I see a fallen napkin and wad it up in my hand, toss it toward the counter. It makes it about ten centimeters then flutters to the floor, and the monster doesn't even notice. It takes a step forward on its sharp conical legs and I imagine them stabbing me through the back of the neck. There's a plate on the table beside me. I stretch out as far as I can without actually shuffling my feet and manage to touch the edge of it with sweaty, sweaty fingers.

I scrabble it toward me, get a grip, and huck it at the counter. The plate smashes. The thing turns. I run. For a beautiful second I'm going to make it. I'm an action hero, slaloming the tables and vaulting over the chairs, pounding toward the door where a few bystanders are watching my plight. Then my shoes skid on a puddle of iced tea and I hit the floor. The monster is on me; I hear its back peeling open, the tendon squeaking as it winds up for the second course. I shut my eyes, wishing I could at least be dying in a hip locally sourced coffee shop.

There's a sizzling noise, a smell like burnt metal, and the blow never comes. I open my eyes and see heavy plastic boots in front of me.

"I always feel bad about doing a chomper," says a woman's voice, filtered through some kind of mask. "They're so cute."

"It's true, they're adorable," says a man's voice, also distorted.

I look up. I can't tell who's who: both are wearing big hazmat-looking suits, jet black, and their faces are covered by breather masks and yellow-tinted goggles. One of them is waving their hand through the whirl of floating ash that I realize used to be the monster. The other is folding up a spiky device that looks more like a power tool than a gun.

"There's the port," says the woman, pointing to the vacated table where the girl left her stuff. The blue hole in the air is gone, and the laptop is back, sitting there all innocent-like.

"Bet you it was her again," says the man, pulling out a black bag with shiny foil lining the inside. He grabs the laptop and goes to stuff it in.

"Hey," I say. "Hey, uh, that's not yours. The owner just ran to the bathroom."

They both turn to look at me. I realize the near-death shock has me floating, brain totally disconnected, and what I just said was incredibly stupid given the circumstances.

"What, they can see us now?" the woman asks, sounding faintly disgusted.

"Goddamn glitching is getting worse all the time," the man says. "Hey, friendo. Hey. Hi. We're doctors. I'm going to shine a little light in your eyes to check for iris dilation, okay?"

"Iris don't dilate," the woman says. "Pupils, you mean."

"Oh, no," I say, getting shakily to my feet as the man fishes a little black tube out of his sleeve. "I've seen that movie. I'm not looking at any little light. Who are you? What the fuck just happened?"

"Nothing unusual," the woman says, and I don't see that she's got a little black tube of her own until it's jammed up into my neck.

"Not unusual to be loooved by anyone," the man croons.

I feel a little pinprick, then—

* * *

The heat's barbaric this summer, weeks of thirty-seven degrees at 80 percent humidity, a thick muggy haze that coats you in sweat the second you step out the door. Thank fuck for coffee shops. The one I'm working in is corporate and soulless and airy and well lit, and the A/C is blasting at absolutely arctic temperatures, cold enough to slice through my heat daze.

There's one unexpected upside to the weather, though. No A/C at home means terrible sleep, most of the night spent tossing and turning in that halfway-dreaming place, and last night I had this really terrific nightmare. I take a sip of chocolate milk and hit save on the morning's fresh document.

Words are finally flowing. I'm done with the gritty detective drama. This new screenplay is going to be more of a paranormal interdimensional action romp type thing, SFX-heavy, totally unsellable, and it's going to be fucking sick.