

ONE

TYPICAL COOP, I THINK, CLOSING MY EYES AND SINKING INTO THE MEEP.

This'll be the sixth time in six months that Mrs. Cuparino has hired me to drag her sorry son home. Fortunately (or unfortunately, I guess, depending on how you look at it), Dean "Coop" Cuparino, like most of the guys at my high school, is an easy egg to crack. His MEEP world hardly varies from the standard-issue sports-hero template. Today it's football again, Coop's favorite.

My ear trans begins the frequency code and a few seconds later I wake up in the Landing, the MEEP entry zone. A three-story virtual mall of glass and gold, the Landing sparkles like a shopaholic heaven, enticing faithful spenders into the fold. Filled with dozens of flashy boutiques, stores, and salons, here you can purchase character enhancements for your avatar, as well as costumes, weapons, tools . . . anything you might want or need for the world you've created.

I usually skip the shopping spree. First of all, it costs *real* money, and I need every penny I earn to go to my college savings, not pretend makeovers. And second, I like my avatar to look like me, no enhancements; it's one of my personal rules, and I pride myself on it.

To be fair, most people I know design their avatars to look like themselves, at least in basic attributes: hair, skin, eye color. I suppose we all have big enough egos to think we look pretty decent the way we are—just a few minor adjustments away from fabulous. That's where the MEEP enhancements come in. The guys make themselves taller and chiseled, pimple-free with washboard abs. The girls give themselves gorgeous hair, silky skin, white teeth, and Barbie-doll bodies.

I understand the temptation, I really do. But here's what happens. You get used to looking like a million bucks in the MEEP, and then . . . *BAM!* Game over. You're backslapped to reality and wake up with your same old blemishes, bedhead, and ratty sweatpants. All of a sudden you can't *stand* yourself. You've seen what your perfect

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self looks like in the MEEP, so when you look in the mirror now, all you see are your flaws.

You're just a sad, sorry replica of your pretend self.

My mom calls it the Michael Jackson Effect—never being happy in your own skin. She warned me about it early on, urging me not to change anything but my costume in the MEEP. Not that I fall for that kind of virtual dream fulfillment anyway. My personal MEEP games involve questing and battle in my own custom-created worlds, not the lame “luvme” templates, like the one I'm in now.

I don't know how these feel-good templates even qualify as *games*, really, but at least they provide me with steady income. It's the luvme gamers like Coop who spend a good chunk of their allowances on timer hacks, so they can stay in the MEEP beyond the preset four-hour maximum. I suppose it's hard to break yourself away from all that *luvin'*. . . .

In any case, I've decided I have to break my own rule about enhancements today. But only because it's a necessity, the price of doing repeat business. Like I said, I've already dragged Coop's butt out of the MEEP five times before. If he sees me coming, he'll run the other way—and fast. I need a disguise, one that Coop will run *toward*.

I quickly start shopping. Time is money. A few minutes later my hair is big and blond, my teeth are white enough to blind a sharpshooter at ten paces, and my boobs are large enough to lift me off the ground and fly me to Oz. Last, I buy a dress roughly the size of a washcloth and matching stilettos that should be classified as lethal weapons.

Oh yeah. Coop is a goner.

I take two steps before I realize I'm wasting valuable time teetering around in these ridiculous anti-walking devices. I slip the heels off and double-time it out of the Landing and through the football stadium toward the players' clubhouse.

The stadium is empty. It doesn't take a PhD to guess what's happened here. The football game is over, probably lasted no more than fifteen minutes. The star quarterback (Coop, naturally) made a string of miraculous plays, handily winning MVP honors, and is now most certainly enjoying the post-game luvme celebration. (“Ladies, come rub against me and smell the swagger!”)

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I hear the party before I'm halfway across the field. The music is pumping loud and bass-heavy, interspersed with the high-pitched giggles of programmed Meeple.

As I reach the clubhouse door, I put my heels back on and tug the hem of my dress, which has inched its way up to my hips. "Time for the grab and go, Nixy," I tell myself, plastering a vacuous smile on my face. I step inside and immediately let out a huge bark of a laugh, nearly blowing my cover.

The usual bikini-clad babes are all over the place, in and out of the twelve-person hot tub in the middle of the room. But it's not the Meeple making me laugh—Coop always populates his MEEP worlds with big-bosomed, underdressed women—it's Coop himself who's cracking me up. The boy's really outdone himself this time. Not only has he given himself the body of Arnold Schwarzenegger, but he's squeezed it all into a bright yellow Speedo. Hell, it looks like he's attached a bag of lemons to his pelvis.

Oh, this is going to be good.

I swing my bouncy blond hair and strut my bodacious body over to him. His eyes light up when he sees me and I try not to smirk. For a second I almost feel sorry for the heap of humiliation I'm about to serve him . . . but then I remember what a tremendous jerk he is at school and the flash of guilt dissipates immediately.

"Hey there," I say stupidly, smiling. Coop smiles back and we dazzle each other with our perfect mouthfuls of bleached teeth. (In real life, Coop has an overbite and my bottom teeth are slightly crooked, due to not wearing my retainer on a regular basis.)

"New to the party, babe?" he asks, putting an arm over my shoulder.

I nod enthusiastically and bat my long lashes. "I can't believe I'm here with the MVP!" I squeal. "I'm the luckiest girl ever! You're so amazing!"

He grins smugly and looks down my dress. "Just doing my job, babe, keeping the fans happy."

I lick my lips at him seductively. "And now it's *my* turn to make *you* happy," I purr, pulling him closer.

"Oh yeah?" says Coop, nearly drooling into my cleavage.

"Oh yeah," I whisper. "But first," I add, raising my voice and enunciating clearly into the MEEPosphere, "*I want to see the real you.*"

Coop's face freezes. He knows that MEEP cheat all too well. It's one of my favorites.

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by licensed officials, or MEEP-O Men, as we gamers call them. The problem is, by the time you pay for the pricey MEEP ear piercing and matching frequency device, who's got an extra grand left over for the security package? Besides, no one ever thinks *they'll* need bailing out, especially teens, and most parents are clueless.

You can't blame them, though—the parents, I mean. In the past, their kids were at least *conscious* while playing video games, even if they did seem stoned or zombie-like. An irritated mother, for instance, could always get in your face and initiate “crazy-lady meltdown” mode with rather prompt results. (My own mom could teach a master class in it, she's so good.) But once a player's in the MEEP, their body just lies around like a limp rag for up to four hours at a time. You can poke it with a stick and it's still not going to move.

At that point, if you really need your kid back in the real world, you have one of three choices:

1. Suck it up, buy the security package, and call the MEEP-O Men, who will shut down the game externally.
2. Wait it out until your kid gets bored in the MEEP. (Yeah, good luck with that.) Or,
3. Call me and have your kid home within the hour for an easy hundred bucks.

Most parents call me. Then they take the hundred bucks out of their kid's allowance or after-school job, so it's no skin off their nose. Parents love me. The kids? Not so much. Whatever. I'm not in this business to make friends.

I've got two pals, Jackson Mooser and Evan Chan-Gonzalez—user names Chocolate Moose and Changatang—who make sure I don't get messed with at school in exchange for the occasional MEEP cheat. I've also promised never to level them, although they don't use timer hacks very much to begin with. After four hours, the MEEP scripts start to repeat themselves, which gets totally annoying, unless, like Coop, all you want to hear is “Oh, Coop, you're my hero!” over and over and over again. No thank you.

I also refuse to level adults. Way too creepy. I can handle parents who want their kids back, but marital disputes? No way. Those things get ugly fast. Usually it's some poor lady with crying kids attached to her legs like barnacles, whose husband is off feeding his ego in a luvme game. Gross. I saw it a couple of times early on, and quickly made a new rule for myself: I only level players ages thirteen to eighteen, and I only work for parents.

Kids under thirteen aren't allowed to play inside the MEEP anyway. They can buy the external package and build their own world if they want, and many do, but for various reasons, including federal regulations in the US,

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“Damn it, Bauer,” he growls, pulling away from me as his enhancements disappear.

Now he’s just an awkward, normal-size teenage boy: five inches shorter, five inches less around the pecs, and a saggy yellow swimsuit.

I consider getting rid of my own ridiculous enhancements now, but I admit, I enjoy towering over him in my heels. I glance at his Speedo and titter behind a manicured hand.

Coop’s face turns red. “You stinking, money-grubbing traitor!” he shouts at me, stalking toward the Landing. He doesn’t even try to stall; he knows his game is up. He tried fighting me the first few times, but without going into details . . . let’s just say it always ended badly for him.

“A job’s a job, Coop, and levelling pays way better than your burger-flipping gig,” I say, “which you’re *late* for, by the way. Better hustle home and get your hairnet on before Mama Coop goes full-psycho on you.”

Coop swears under his breath. “One day I’m going full-psycho on *you*, you dirty MEEP rat.”

I shrug and follow him back to the Landing. It certainly isn’t the first time I’ve been sworn at by a disgruntled gamer. Since I started levelling six months ago, I’ve been called every name in the book. But hey, I’m good at it, and it beats bagging groceries or washing cars. I charge a flat rate: one hundred bucks a pop. Not bad for an hour or less of work. My business motto is “Nixy Bauer, Home in an Hour.” If I don’t deliver the goods to parents—meaning, drag their wayward sons and daughters back from the MEEP within the hour—they don’t have to pay me. That’s why they hire me. I’m fast and I never fail to deliver.

I have my tricks, of course. Both my parents work for the MEEP, or MeaParadisus Inc., as it’s officially known, so I’ve grown up with the game, or at least for the three years it was in development before its world release last year. My dad is a concept artist and my mom writes Meeple script. If you think that sounds glamorous, think again. They’re basically lowly peons and poorly paid at that, but they do get full access to the MEEP codes and cheats, which are key to levelling. In fact, my mom even writes a lot of the cheats, the little bits of dialogue that cue certain responses. Like “I want to see the real you,” the one I just used on Coop; spoken clearly, those words will immediately turn off primary avatar enhancements. Usually that’s all I need to say to ruin a game for someone and force him back home.

Of course, MeaParadisus offers a premium security package, which guarantees twenty-four-hour “Safe Return”

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they're not allowed to have the frequency piercing until their thirteenth birthday. And even then, their parents have to sign a yard-long, small-print waiver that most people never read. Certainly, Mrs. Cuparino didn't read it or she might have thought twice before letting her son have instant access to his own virtual Pleasure Island.

Coop beats me back to the Landing. By the time I wake up in my collapsible lawn chair (I insist on providing my own napping equipment), his mom is already laying into him. Coop glares at me as I fold up my chair and take the pile of twenties Mrs. Cuparino has left on the dresser for me. Like I said, we've been through this before. She knows I'm as good as my word.

I take out my phone and glance at the time. Took me less than fifteen minutes to level Coop this time.

Maybe I should raise my rates.