

Meat

A growth industry.

Paul McAuley

We certainly don't call any of our clients 'The Meat', or 'Pork Chop #1'. That's just tabloid nonsense. And while we're skewering misconceptions, the job isn't as glamorous as you might think. Although I go to club and restaurant openings, film premières, first nights, fashion shows and stay in first-class hotels all around the world, I'm not there to enjoy myself. I'm there to prevent any live cells from my clients' bodies falling into the hands of meatleggers.

Sweep, security and clean-up: that's what the job is about. First, my team sweeps the place before the client arrives, everything from running background checks on staff to inspecting the restrooms. Restrooms are where the clients are most vulnerable, of course. We run fibre optic cameras down the pipework, looking for traps and filters; we check for microscopic rasps designed to trap a few skin cells by fogging the place with an aerosol of tailored bacteria and using ultraviolet light to spot any unusual clumping. We inspect seating, too; tableware at restaurants; glasses at bars; cocktail napkins — we have detailed checklists for every type of venue.

After the client arrives, we run an extra layer of security. No known meatlegger gets within a hundred yards of any of my perimeters, but they'll bribe staff or plant some innocent-looking old lady in the crowd, and it's not unknown for some minor celebrity in need of quick cash to try to snag a few cells from an A-lister. I have a database of known stooges and my people keep a lookout for abnormal behaviour, I can't tell you any more than that. Afterwards, there's the clean-up, which is the most routine but most important part of the job, and which I always supervise personally. Some cleaners ride shotgun on their clients on the way back from an event, but I like to make sure that the venue is sterilized more thoroughly than any operating theatre. The bodyguards can look after the client in transit, and besides, once

they're in their limo, my clients are protected by a Class Four biohazard containment environment. Not even a virus can get in or out.

Hotels? That's a whole book right there. Any place a client of mine would use has its own cleaning protocol, but I like to think I add my special magic to the mix.

Like a lot of cleaners, I started out in public

As soon as anyone managed to get a viable scrap of tissue, that was it. The meat was out there. The only way to stop it was to bust the places where it was grown.

Dangerous? Not really. The meat trade is too specialized to interest professional criminals, although quite a few are customers; one crime boss likes to serve the meat of his enemies with his special sauce.

Politicians and businesspeople also enjoy revenge feasts, but the fans are the backbone of the trade. These days, you aren't a hardcore tru-fan unless you've partaken of the flesh of your hero. It's the ultimate form of possession, and I don't suppose I need to point out the parallels with Christian communion. No, that's just an urban myth lifted from some cheesy bestseller. In order to clone tissue, you need to start with live cells, or at least a live nucleus, and after 2,000 years... exactly.

Cloned babies? Another myth. It's very difficult to turn a somatic cell into an embryo, and even harder to bring it to term. Far easier to grow sheets of epidermis or muscle. I guess the oddest case I dealt with was the meatlegger who cloned himself. All he ate was his own meat. I guess you could say he was really into self-sufficiency.

I don't think the meat trade is going to die out any time soon. Most clone lines have been wiped out, and

people like me do their best to make sure that the meatleggers have a hard time getting fresh ones started, but now there's this new thing. These nanotech makers. Pretty soon the meatleggers won't need live cells, just a DNA sequence, and I've heard that these makers can build an entire body from scratch.

As long as people keep finding twisted uses for new technology, there'll always be a need for people like me, cleaning up the mess.

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health, running DNA analyses in a forensic laboratory. That was ten years ago, when the meat trade was at its height. We were processing 10,000 samples a day. Most were fakes. 'Princess Di' for instance, was originally a basal-cell carcinoma excised from a 58-year-old Albanian woman, but it didn't stop the meatleggers moving 20 tonnes of product. Then fans started doing their own DNA analyses, and growing their own supplies. Once someone has started a cloned cell line, anyone with an incubator, access to a few common biochemicals, and basic knowledge about cell culture can keep it going indefinitely. By the time I joined one of the vat-busting teams, most of the meat we were chasing was 100% genuine cloned celebrity.

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