

MONEY MYTHS

THE MYTH: A VISITOR TO A THIRD WORLD CITY IS MUGGED AND AWAKES IN HOSPITAL TO FIND HIMSELF MISSING A KIDNEY. HEALTHY ORGANS, HE IS TOLD, FETCH A HANDSOME PRICE ON THE BLACK MARKET.

THE REALITY: Jan Harold Brunvand, the world's leading authority on urban myths, has uncovered variations of this tale as far afield as Los Angeles, Russia, Tunisia, Honduras, Guatemala and Southern Italy. In January last year, it also provided the basis for an episode of Radio 4's *Fear on Four* drama series in the UK.

A sexual frisson is sometimes added by having the victim spend the night with a beautiful woman, and waking up alone with the sheets covered in blood.

Yet a moment's thought shows that the story is next to impossible. A major operation, such as the removal of a kidney, is no trivial matter. Where was the operation performed? By whom? If outside, how was the area sterilised? And lit? Why stop with one kidney? How was the kidney transported and stored? And who precisely did this happen to?

The Radio 4 version, entitled *Playing God*, at least attempted to answer some of these questions by setting the story in an unscrupulous private clinic in London, where a corrupt surgeon preyed on the young homeless. Ridley Pearson's 1993 novel *The Angel Maker*, set in Seattle, is based on the same premise.

This first string of the story seems to spring from rural visitors' fear of visiting the big city. But there is a second strand, which reflects growing Third World resentment at exploitation by the affluent West.

Early last year three US tourists in Guatemala – all women – were attacked and, in one case, killed by mobs of angry locals who believed them to be baby-snatchers. Many Guatemalans believe American

visitors come to their country to steal children, whose bodies are then sold on the illegal transplant market.

A child's liver, it is said, will fetch \$150,000 (about £94,000) in the US, a heart \$100,000 and lungs \$100,000 the pair.

The US Embassy in Guatemala believes the rumours spring from old KGB propaganda, originally circulated in Guatemala before the end of the Cold War. One theory is that this propaganda has been adopted by the hard-right Guatemalan military, anxious to destabilise the government.

Guatemalan versions of *The Kidney Heist* often feature a jeep with blacked-out windows used for the kidnappings. And in Poland, the vehicle is a mysterious black limousine, which tours the city streets, abducting children and stealing their blood.

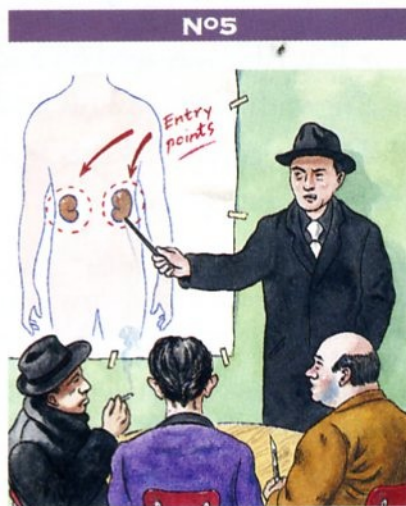
Perhaps Radio 4's *Playing God* was inspired by the 1989 case involving three British doctors who

offered private kidney transplants using organs which they had bought legally in Turkey. It was this case which led to the Human Organs Transplant Act, which outlaws all trade in human organs in the UK.

In one Madras ghetto, the sale of kidneys among desperate local residents is so common that the area is known as "kidney colony". The donors, who risk death from lack of post-operative care, receive about £300 each. China has raised this ruthlessness to state level, executing prisoners to order for their kidneys or corneas.

That people will sell their internal organs to survive is true. But that even one Western tourist has been mugged for this, or an infant stolen, is highly unlikely. **Paul Slade**

● For more details of *The Kidney Heist*, see Brunvand's *The Baby Train* (WW Norton, 1993). *Playing God* was broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on January 22, 1994. Ridley Pearson's *The Angel Maker* is published by Pocket Books.



THE KIDNEY HEIST