

Down and Out in Athens

Excerpt from *Nike* by Cara Hoffman

Cara Hoffman

Set in the red light district of Athens, Greece in the late 1980s, Cara Hoffman's cult classic novel, *Nike*, is about getting by at the periphery. It chronicles the lives of a group of young expatriates from a global culture of war.

In this scene Maya Brennan, who has been raised on military bases throughout the US, and has sold her passport to finance her travels, uses the cultural capital of her upbringing to get the document re-issued. NIKE reveals a world where freelance military contractors, small-time traffickers, and refugees from the superficial materialism of the Reagan/Bush era surf undetected on the crest of a wave that was about to break in an era of perpetual military engagement.

Nike and Hoffman's short story collection, *The Wedding*, are available from Small Press Distribution, <http://www.spdbooks.org/>.

I sat and smoked and counted my money. When this carton's empty, I thought, I will have saved fifteen dollars. Maybe I could go to the islands before I have to start smoking Navys. I couldn't afford to keep smoking. I had to save. The waves of nausea came and went. I wanted them to settle so I could get up and start moving again. I had to get going, and my stomach was slowing me down. The lack of money was impressive considering how much I had managed to spend just doing nothing. And how much I'd made selling my original passport.

I remembered that day at the consulate. The day I got a new one issued. I was the last of the three of us to do it.

It had been a worthwhile hassle, and made us fifteen hundred dollars. I'd filled out the paperwork, but I'd no other identification.

Z5530900, I wrote down, sitting at a little desk to the right of the window in the marble and tile hall of the American consulate. That had been my passport number. Then Name: Brennan, Maya Kathleen. Sex: I got an 'F' in that category. Birthplace: NY, USA. Birth date: 2/10/73. Nationality: "You put 'drunkard' down for that one right?!"

I slid the form and the square photo booth picture of my face beneath the glass that separated me from the bald, suited official. He took it, went away, and then came back with questions.

Where did I go to school?

Where had I been staying?

How much money did I have?

Who were my parents?

Where were they?

I looked bad—did I need some clothes or lunch maybe?

No?

Name of the hotel again?

I'd been traveling for how long?

Sure I wasn't working here? Begging here?

Did I know the same drug laws were enforced in Greece as in the U.S.? Stricter, in fact?

No money? No passport? No return ticket? No ID?

No Passport. I'd have to wait in this room...I'd have to be interviewed by...

I live with my brother, I told him. He's Airborne Special Forces, retired. He goes to Cornell University on the GI bill. I watched his face relax as he recast me in his mind. I'll be going home at the end of the summer, I said, standing straight and looking into his face. He's seen to it.

He set the forms down and looked at me. Roughing it, eh? I smiled.

Yeah.

Roughing it.

Trust...amused will to assist. I watched myself in his face, move fluidly from a desperate loser with suspect motivations, to "cute," To "spunky tomboy." Watched myself move from a check list of details in a consulate training film called "How to identify a drug trafficker," to a cameo role in a film about an orphan in which Shirley Temple salutes.

The reverence on his face was hilarious. I had to pause with my lines—it looked like we might have to take a curtain call right there, so genius was his comic parody. That solemn understanding he had with himself. The will to support a good kid down on her luck. I mean, after all I was American. We were American.

He'd support my God given right to a passport, for the U.S.A., and for the sacrifices my brother'd made. My brother Sergeant-First-Class-Special-Forces-Airborne. It took eight seconds. And another half an hour to get the document.

Okay, Maya, you're all set.

Thank you for squaring me away, sir.

He smiled at that. It's issued for a year—get your brother to send us a copy of your birth certificate and we can extend it for you right away for ten—or you can just take care of it when you get home.

I sure will, sir. Thank you, now.

And I was Maya Brennan again, a few years older in the new photograph. And it might have all been fine if we'd have stopped there.

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