

Here's Looking at You, Kid by Mike Resnick

Mike Resnick's latest novel, *The Return of Santiago*, has just been published by Tor Books. We're pleased to note that his last twelve Asimov's stories have all been Hugo nominees.

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"I came to Casablanca for the waters."

Renault almost guffaws. "Waters? What waters? We're in the desert."

I shrug. "I was misinformed," I say.

Renault gives me a look.

Okay, pal, I think, I'm keeping my end of the bargain, I gave you a hell of a line, one they'll be quoting for months. Just remember that when she shows up.

Then Renault lays it on me: he's making an arrest tonight. At Rick's. Okay, so he knows about Ugarte. Big deal. He acts like he's doing me a favor, as if we need the publicity.

"We know there are many exit visas sold in this café," he continues, "but we know you have never sold one. That is the reason we permit you to remain open."

"I thought it was because we let you win at roulette." Oh, I'm in rare form tonight. There's another quotable line for you. Now just remember who your friends are.

"That is another reason," agrees Renault amiably.

Then comes *The Moment*. He mentions Victor Lazlo. I act impressed. I'm doing my job, playing my role, piling up points. Why admit that I hate the son of a bitch, that he's got the brains of a flea and the personal magnetism of a fire hydrant, that he speaks only in platitudes?

I start wondering: how can I score a bonus point? Then the perfect solution hits me, and I offer to bet that Lazlo escapes.

I can see in Renault's eyes that he knows that Lazlo can never be confined to Casablanca, that he'll find a way to leave, but he's got his agenda and his priorities, just as I have mine, and he takes the bet.

Then he goes off to arrest Ugarte. Poor little bastard with the poached-egg eyes and the high nasal whine. He wasn't a bad guy, not when you compare him to the rest of the scum that inhabit this godforsaken city in the sand. Sure, he lied and he cheated and he took what didn't belong to him—but show me a resident of Casablanca who doesn't do the same thing. Hell, Ferrari buys and sells human beings, and Renault buys and sells the favors of half the human race. All Ugarte did was kill and rob some Nazis.

He runs up to me, the doomed little man in his sweat-stained white suit, the gendarmes hot on his tail, and begs me to help him, hide him, do something for him. I can't, of course; there are twenty French cops waving their guns at us ... but it gives me a chance to add to the persona I've been building so carefully. I push Ugarte away, right into the arms of Renault's men, and brush myself off, uttering some crowd-pleasing drivel about how I stick my neck out for no one. The trick is to say it with insincere sincerity, so that everyone knows I'm going to stick my neck out for someone sooner or later.

I let Renault introduce me to the head Kraut and the obsequious Kraut and the pizza eater who can't

stop talking, and then Sam starts playing *The Song* and I know Ilsa's here. I pretend I don't, I walk up to him and start demanding that he quit playing, and then I see her. She's a big girl, taller than I remember, and I'm glad they've got me wearing lifts; it wouldn't do to have her tower over me. Her perfume is as sweet and delicate as I remember, her eyes are as blue, her cheekbones as high, her skin as smooth. It still surprises me how such a large woman can be so feminine.

Our eyes meet, and that old feeling is still there. Suddenly I don't care that she deserted me in Paris, I'd sell everything I've got to Ferrari or anyone else if she'd agree to go away with me; hell, I'd even toss Sam into the bargain. She left me once, but it won't happen again, not this time. I've done everything asked of me. I started the casino, I've come up with line after line that people will quote, I've created a persona that men will want to emulate and women will want to seduce. I'm five feet eight, I smoke like a chimney, I'm starting to go bald—and I'm a romantic hero. Now fair is fair. This time she's got to stay with me, this time we have a happy ending. You owe me that, pal, and I expect you to pay your debts. Maybe you can even clean things up so we can go back to the States. If not, then Australia, or maybe Rio or Bahia—someplace, any place that this goddamned war hasn't reached.

I look at her again, and I remember the way she melted in my arms, the smell and taste and feel of her when I kissed her. And I think of our last morning in Paris. She wore blue, the Germans wore guns. I like the sound of it, but at the last moment He jerks me around and changes it. "The Germans wore gray," I find myself saying. "You wore blue." Okay, I admit, it's better your way. But I'm trying, damn it; surely you can see that I'm trying.

Then she hits me between the eyes with it—she's married to Lazlo.

"That sexless speechmaker?" I want to say. "I'll bet he hasn't touched you in six months." But I don't, I manage to look shocked. And I'm thinking, That was a low blow, pal. I'm walking the line for you, I'm pulling my weight, and this is how you thank me? You'd better get your act together quick, or I'm not the only one who will suffer. I don't have to be cynical and sardonic, you know; I can keep my mouth shut just as easily—and don't you forget it.

She walks off with the King of the Platitudes, and I stay behind to brood. Sam closes the place up and starts playing *The Song*, while I wonder aloud why out of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world she walked into mine—and the second the words leave my mouth, I know I've given him another line that he'll be taking bows for five years from now.

I'm making you famous, I think. I've never been better than I am tonight. You want to thank me? Give me the girl, and this time let me keep her.

Ilsa stops by to pay me a secret visit and tell me why she married Lazlo, as if I give a damn. So she's lived with him for the past year. Who cares? There aren't any virgins left in the world, not in the middle of all this killing. We all have flings, and the dumb ones marry them. All I care about is that she's back, and I have to make sure that this time she stays.

I lie and tell her that Ugarte only gave me one letter of transit, not two. I can get Lazlo out of the country, but she'll have to stay until I can figure a way to get us out together. It doesn't seem to bother her. She left me once, she says, and she hasn't the strength to do it again. Just the words I want to hear.

I know I can take her to bed right now, and it's been a long time, but He says No, not yet, we have to build more tension, Lazlo's only a block away and Strasser's goons might break in at any moment, and even Renault could sell you out for the right price.

So we just talk. I'm so pissed that I go out of my way to speak in monosyllables. No more quotes for you, pal, not until you meet me halfway.

An hour before dawn I send her back to Lazlo, half-hoping she'll walk in on him with one of the bimbos who set up shop under the gas lamps along the street ... but I know it won't happen: this guy's too much in love with himself to waste his attentions on anyone else. Then, when the sun comes up, I walk over to the Blue Parrot and offer to sell out to Ferrari. He practically drools at the chance to buy Rick's.

I tell him he's got to keep Sam, and he agrees. Then I decide to do my good deed for the day—I don't figure stealing Lazlo's wife really counts as one—so I tell him that Sam gets a quarter of the profits. He grins and tells me he knows Sam gets only 10 percent, but he's worth a quarter and a quarter's what he'll get. I grimace. He agreed too fast. That means with Ferrari doing the books Rick's won't show a profit for the next ten years, and poor Sam will be working his ass off for twenty bucks a week and tips—but I haven't got time to worry about that, because I'm trying to get all my ducks in a row before the grand climax.

Before long I'm at the airport with Renault. I've told Ilsa to get Lazlo here, to tell him there are two letters of transit and they're for the pair of them. It's going to be interesting to see his face when he finds out we're putting him on the plane all by himself. My guess is that as soon as he figures out that he'll still be able to spout off in front of an audience he won't argue, he'll just grab his letter, kiss Ilsa good-bye, and go.

I still don't know which side Renault's on—the one with the most willing women, probably—so I take his gun away and turn mine on him. He seems more amused than frightened.

Suddenly Ilsa and Lazlo appear out of the fog, just as the plane to Lisbon begins warming up its engines. I hand him an envelope with one letter, and he doesn't even look at it, he just thanks me and tells me this time our side will win.

I want to sneer and say, “I ain't on your side, sweetheart!” but something—someone—stops me. He goes off to check the luggage, and I turn to Ilsa.

“We're together forever now, baby.” That's what I want to say. But what comes out is some speech about how the problems of three people don't come to a hill of beans, and that he needs her for his work.

I check my pocket. The other letter of transit is gone, and I know with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that Lazlo has both of them.

No! I want to scream. I did my job! I played my part, I gave you all the quotes you can handle, I let Ugarte go down the tubes and I'm arranging for Lazlo to get out in one piece. I won, damn it! I deserve her!

Ilsa looks at me with tears in her eyes. “And I said I would never leave you!” she says.

Then don't! I try to say. I hope you don't think I'm doing all this for the bozo you married. But the words catch in my throat, and instead I'm telling her that we'll always have Paris.

She's about to say something else, but I just give her a loving smile and find myself saying, “Here's looking at you, kid.”

Great. The dumbest thing I've said in years, and it's the one everyone will remember.

Then they're on the plane, and I turn around and Major Strasser's there. He's got no reason in the world to be at the airport except to make me look even more heroic. Fuck you, pal, I say silently. If I don't get the girl, you don't get a John Wayne gunfight. I shoot Strasser down in cold blood just as the plane takes

off.

It's obvious that we need a memorable line, something to break the tension.

Think of your own line. I'm not playing any more.

Finally Renault says, "Round up the usual suspects."

Not bad. I'd have done better, but not bad.

There's nothing left to do. We start walking off into the fog. He says something about going to Brazzaville. Just what I always wanted: a garrison with no electricity, no running water, and no women except for the ones who wear those huge plates in their lips.

Give me a break, I try to say. What comes out is, "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Then it's over, and I'm in limbo. I analyze what I did, what I said, what I could have done better, or at least differently. I've got to prepare, to think of subtle ways to manipulate Him as He manipulates me. I've got a little time to get ready: there'll be the newsreel, and a couple of cartoons, and the coming attractions, and then we start it all over again.

Only this time I'll get the girl.