

## CUMPLEAÑOS

by Lee Benoit



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*This story features Vladi, the scene-stealing younger brother of Alexei from “The Hustler Prince.” When we left him, he was preparing to leave Cuba for a business school in Barcelona.*

“How are you liking your first junket?” Abdelrazek watched his young guest closely. Barcelona was hours behind them, and the city’s dockside stinks had given way to clean ocean smells, the breeze not cool enough to be bracing, not warm enough – not yet – to be sultry.

The young man leaned against the railing of the lovingly-restored sloop, his gauzy shirt unbuttoned and billowing lazily, his tiny, tiny swimsuit a torment to Razek. Blue beads glinted in the brown lobes of the boy’s ears, and several loops of the variegated blue glass circled both slender wrists.

Vladimir turned from his position at the rail, his honey skin dark against the undulating white of the sloop’s sails. He put Razek in mind of the gazelle-eyed boys of al-Nawaji’s reverent poetry, and he almost said so. *Oh, come on*, he thought resignedly, *this kid’s got you thinking of Abu Nuwas’s bad-boy bum-fun, not al-Nawaji’s ‘faces to make the sun blush at noontime.’* Of course, his own face felt warmer than the late-morning sun warranted. He swallowed a sigh.

“I thought guests on these things couldn’t expect to have their host all to themselves.” Vladimir fingered the blue beads at his wrist. “It was kind of you to invite me along before I’m fully qualified.”

Razek shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable. He decided to jump in with both feet. “I admit I was motivated by more than your director’s recommendation.”

To his surprise, his companion laughed out loud, his long throat exposed and undulating like the sails above their heads. Vladímir hadn't come across as shy or serious in the gay tourism workshop Razek had run at the business school, and if Razek were honest he'd confess Miguel's sterling academic assessment of the ebullient Cuban student had come as something of a surprise. Even if he hadn't already been smitten by Vladímir's beauty and winsomeness, he'd have been hard pressed to choose any other student for this brief tour of North African "alternative" resorts.

Vladímir grinned at Razek, the corners of his eyes still crinkled with laughter and damp with tears. "You chose me for this trip because I'm queer as a five-legged goat, and not ugly. Right?" He tossed his head as if to flick long tresses out of the way, though his short curls stirred not at all. Razek was captivated.

"I'm parched," Vladímir announced and walked toward the gangway that led below, slinking his hips, and Razek was following, protesting, he knew, too much. "I chose you for this opportunity because few of your classmates intend to cater for a gay clientele; there is much I might teach you."

A delicate snort drifted up the narrow ladder. "You think I 'intend to cater for a gay clientele?'" Razek should have bridled at Vladímir's mocking tone, but instead smiled at the way the boy mimicked his accent.

"Don't you?" He reached the bottom of the ladder. Vladímir didn't step aside to make room, so Razek crowded in, feeling like a randy old goat.

Valdímir laughed again, this time cynically. "You think I will bring gay tourism to Cuba? Me? I dare not speak my name!" There was defiance under the sarcasm, and Razek was more intrigued than ever. He leaned closer, smelling sun and sweat.

"Because you are gay?" He felt a twinge of sympathy. It wasn't easy to grow up gay in Cairo, either.

Vladímir shook his head slowly, a wicked smile tilting his full lips and stage whispered, "Because I'm a capitalist." He laughed again and pushed past Razek, heading for the little galley.

"Don't you want to know why I accepted your offer?"

Razek followed, frowning. "Not for the experience, my recommendation, a possible job when you graduate?"

"*Tonto!* I came because today I am nineteen and I thought a luxury cruise to Sousse would be the perfect present."

"It's your birthday?"

"My first so far from home." Vladi turned, a mock pout turning his lovely face comical. "You will help me celebrate?"

Razek tried for bluff expansiveness, but feared he'd bogged down in a leer. "I am your host. Of course we must celebrate. How would you celebrate in Cuba?"

"If we were in the country, maybe roast a goat. In the city, dancing and mojitos."

"Not the five-legged goat?" Razek made it all the way to mock horror this time.

Vladimir chuckled wickedly. "Oh, not him. He's strictly a tourist attraction."

"I have no goat to slaughter but I can make a mojito," Razek offered.

"No dancing here?"

"I fear not."

Vladimir leaned a little closer, batting his eyes languidly. "But you will take me in Sousse?"

Razek knew he was too old for the rooftop discos in the Tunisian resort town, but nonetheless he heard himself say, "It will be our first stop."

Razek had been so focused on his speech and his consternation that he didn't anticipate Vladimir's hug. It knocked him off balance and he clipped his hip painfully on the steel counter.

Vladimir jumped back, righting him.

Rubbing his hip with one hand, Razek made gentle shooping motions with the other. "Let's leave dinner for a bit." He had designs to serve supper on deck with a view of Sardinia glittering off their port side in the purple evening. "I'll fix you that mojito, what do you say?" Razek was pleased his voice betrayed so little of the turmoil inside him.

Vladimir nodded, smiling.

Razek set out tall glasses and filled them with ice, all the while considering what he wanted. He didn't want Vladimir to tolerate his advances as payment for the trip, yet he had a difficult time convincing himself the young man could want him for any other reason than gratitude or a sense of obligation.

He cursed himself for a middle-aged fool while he added some lime juice from an old-fashioned bottle, and sparkling club soda. Then he splashed white rum, superfine sugar, and a bright sprig of mint for each glass. He was unable to resist a fussy little flourish as he passed one over to his guest.

Vladimir's nose was wrinkled quizzically as he accepted his glass, clinked it to Razek's, and sipped.

"Happy Birthday, Vladimir," Razek said, savoring the tangy-sweet flavor of the mojito. Emboldened by his desire and the unaccustomed alcohol, he leaned across the narrow counter and dared a kiss.

To his delight, Vladimir kissed back. It was a gentle, light kiss, a brushing of lips that made no promises but closed no doors, either.

"Thank you," Razek said softly as he straightened.

"Thank you," Vladimir countered. "This is a very nice drink. What did you call it again?" His bitter-chocolate eyes were dancing with mischief.

"It is a mojito," Razek said with wounded pride. "The very recipe enjoyed by Hemingway in Havana."

"No wonder I didn't recognize it," Vladimir said, nodding and frowning comically. He took another sip.

"Shall I show you how we make a mojito for my birthday?"

“Only if you kiss me again, lovely Vladímir.” Razek tightened his hands around his glass to keep from slapping them over his traitorous mouth. And to think, his lovers usually complained of his restraint.

Vladímir’s tilted smile told him he needn’t have made the effort – the boy knew exactly what Razek was thinking.

“Vladi,” the boy said absently as he started sliding open cupboards and peering into the little refrigerator. “Do you have any guarapo?”

“Any what?”

“Cane juice. Not so sweet. Much more Cuban.” There was that wry little smile again.

“I don’t think so.”

Razek wanted desperately to give Vladi anything he requested. Why did he have to ask for something they wouldn’t be able to get until they docked at Sousse?

When Vladi stretched up to explore the cupboard’s top shelf, Razek’s regret dissipated, burned away by lust. He angled his hips behind the counter to hide the erection pressing against his modest trunks.

“*Casi perfecto*,” the boy said, holding up a bag of demerara sugar. “Pan?”

Razek pointed to the little oven, and Vladi opened it, bent, and reached inside. The boy had a perfect ass. “*You were an easy kill*,” Razek quoted Abu Nuwas at himself. *Insha’Allah....*

Vladi added water to the sugar and touched a match to the range burner. “Insha’Allah?”

He’d spoken aloud? Razek blushed, deeper than he had up on the deck. He couldn’t remember the last time his face had heated so. It felt as swollen as his prick.

Vladi stirred, his hips twitching minutely as he heated the sugar. “Like ‘*ojalá*’?”

*“Ojalá?”*

“If God wills it. *Ojalá que* you have golden rum. *Ojalá que* I don’t burn the sugar. *Ojalá que* there are real limes. *Ojalá que—*”

*“Insha’Allah* you kiss me again.”

Vladi looked at him from the tail of his gazelle eyes. “I haven’t kissed you. You kissed me.” He went back to stirring.

*“Insha’Allah* you kiss me,” Razek whispered. His friends would laugh to see their smooth, cool Razek reduced to hoarse whispers. Razek wasn’t laughing. He could barely breathe.

Instead of kissing him, Vladi shrugged his shoulders and his shirt slithered down his arms where he caught it against his free hand.

“Hot in here,” he grinned.

Razek reached out to take the shirt, briefly stroking the blue beads around Vladi’s wrist, wishing he could stroke the blue studs at his ears or twine his fingers in the many-stranded blue-beaded necklace that gleamed darkly with Vladi’s sweat.

Then he caught sight of the – good lord! – golden nipple rings with their tiny blue beads shadowed by glossy little teats.

“Ice, please, Sidi Murat.”

Razek mentally shook himself, recovering partially. “So formal, when I must call you Vladi?” Razek asked, handing over two glasses filled with ice.

“What, then?”

“Razek is what friends call me.”

Razek palmed two limes from the fruit bowl and passed them over.

Vladi wrapped his fingers around them and rolled them gently, staring at Razek as he squeezed them.

“I think not. Knife?”

What were they talking about? Razek found a knife and a thick-handled wooden juicer.

Vladi cut the limes without putting them down, then slowly twirled the juicer into the glistening center of one half, parting his lips, snaking his tongue out as if in concentration. Razek made a tiny, undignified sound. The cheeky imp winked at him and held Razek's eye as he held his hand over the first glass and pressed, twisting the handle slowly until the juice ran between his fingers and over the ice. Razek might have whimpered if he'd been able to breathe.

Equal measures of steaming syrup followed and the ice crackled as it began to melt.

"What do your lovers call you?" As if he had so many.

"Razek." None had been more than a sexually obliging friend. That had been enough until the day he gave a workshop in Miguel's class. "What do your... lovers call you?" The thought of Vladi entertaining other lovers was unpleasant.

"I've never had one."

If Razek had been drinking he would have choked. "Never?"

Vladi shrugged. "My brothers protected me in Cuba, and in Barcelona Gil and Elena keep an eye on me, and I am very busy with my studies. I'm very young, you know."

There was that sly look again. Razek's knees started to feel as if they'd had warm sugar syrup poured over them, melted and weak. He edged onto one of the bar stools and leaned on his elbows.

"You are very..."

"Alexei says I'm a tease."

"Are you?"

"I don't mean to be. Pass the mint, please."

Vladi held out his hand, the long fingers still wet with lime juice.

Passing over a handful of sprigs, Razek said, "The way you dress, and walk..."

“And talk and look. I know.” Vladi sighed dramatically. “Such a twink.” He said it in English and they both laughed. Razek’s erection subsided from painfully rampant to merely urgent.

“Now watch, *papi*, this is the most important part.”

Vladi took one sprig of mint and pressed it to his chest, between the loops of blue beads. He rolled it back and forth, making the beads clack, never quite reaching either brown nipple. The smell of mint and sweat joined the heavy smell of the sugar in the little galley. When the mint was thoroughly mangled, Vladi tilted one glass, then the other, and rubbed the leaves along the sides and rim.

As with the juicing of the lime and the stirring of the sugar, the procedure made Razek’s heart stutter. Vladi accepted the bottle of Bacardi Gold from Razek, holding it by the neck as he splashed rum into both glasses. The rum swirled with the sugar and lime juice and melted ice to make a brownish, cloudy mixture Razek would have sent back in a reputable bar. Now, instead, his hand reached out for the glass, eager to taste.

But Vladi held up one long finger. “*Ahorita*,” he scolded. “One more thing.”

Razek watched as Vladi stirred the first mojito with the knife blade, then added one more sprig of mint and licked off the knife. His tongue wrapped around the blade and Razek caught the gleam of a blue-beaded barbell there. Where else was his gazelle pierced?

Vladi set that first mojito next to himself. “Birthday boy gets first taste,” he said. He reached for the knife again to stir Razek’s drink, but put it down with a mischievous smirk. He picked up the wooden juicer instead. The fat ridges barely fit into the glass and Vladi made a great show of easing it in. “Wouldn’t want to break anything, *papi*,” he murmured, rolling the narrow handle between his palms.

Razek’s cock was back to painful. He had a feeling he knew what was coming next.

Vladi withdrew the juicer from the glass, shaking it off with a grin, and looked into Razek’s eyes. He parted his lips and proceeded to lick the juicer, driving his tongue into every groove, never taking his eyes off Razek’s.

Razek bit his tongue.

Coming in his trunks was possible, Razek though distantly as Vladi tipped his head back, closed his eyes, and sucked the whole bulb of the juicer into his mouth. His cheeks hollowed and his throat worked as he swallowed. He made a small humming sound and Razek hid his groan behind it.

Slowly pulling the juicer from between his lips and blinking slowly, Vladi passed Razek his mojito. They touched glasses and drank.

Razek fancied he could taste the boy's sweat under the sharp lime, mellow mint, and dark sugar.

"Better, see?"

Razek was about to say he could barely see through the force of his desire, but realized Vladi was talking about the cocktail.

"It's perfect," Razek said with feeling.

He sipped again and felt the golden rum go to his head. Of course it did. There was no blood left anywhere above his navel, and Razek felt like he was floating.

So he nearly fell off his stool when Vladi said, "Now, a real Cuban birthday kiss to go with my real Cuban birthday mojito."

He had stepped to the end of the little bar and stood directly before Razek, stepping between Razek's knees when he pivoted the stool.

Razek gasped and Vladi took full advantage of the parting of his lips to drive his cool, mobile tongue into Razek's mouth. The barbell clicked against his teeth, and Vladi's full lips moved strongly over his. Two hands, one cold from holding the glass, the other sticky from the lime juice, curled around his throat and teased his ears, his hair, the nape of his neck.

Razek never got control of that kiss, not even when Vladi drew his tongue back into his mouth, coaxing Razek's to follow only to suck on it for long moments, pressing with the barbell. He finally broke the kiss and pulled back far enough that Razek could focus his eyes on the half-lidded eyes and reddened, smiling mouth of his gazelle.

“*Habibi*,” Razek gasped.

“*Habibi?*”

“I want you to call me *Habibi*. Beloved.”

“*Habibi*.” Vladi raised his glass and chimed his base against Razek’s rim.  
“*Habibi. ¡Pura vida!*”

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### Well-behaved Mojitos for Two

6 fresh mint sprigs  
4 tsp sugar  
6 tbsp fresh lime juice  
3 oz light rum  
Club soda or selzer

In a tall thin glass, crush part of the mint with a fork to coat the inside. Add the sugar and lime juice and stir thoroughly. Top with ice. Add rum and mix. Top off with chilled club soda (or seltzer). Add a lime slice and the remaining mint, and serve.

For the less civilized version, call Vladi when he gets back to Barcelona!

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