Excerpted from the upcoming *Around the World in 80 Gigs.*

Chapter 5
JOENSUU

*"Billy rapped all night about his suicide,
How he'd kick it in the head when he was 25."*

– Mott the Hoople
"All the Young Dudes"

If you want to see my penis, you have to marry me. I'm unlike some men who, after finding themselves in groups with other men, are not shy about waving their business around like a sock puppet. Me, I'm more of a sit-and-hide-it kind of guy, so when Mikko and Al made it their singular purpose to get us into a Finnish sauna (or "sow-nah," as the Finns say it), I relented -- in the spirit of experiential journalism -- and got naked and sweaty with my fellow travelers.

It was an easier decision once I found myself at the most perfect sauna imaginable. How I ended up getting there is worth explaining. After our show in Jyvaskyla, Mikko took us on a long sixty minute drive into the countryside, where we navigated a dark, wooded road before settling at the top of a hill in front of an old converted schoolhouse, the weekend retreat of Mikko's sister-in-law's friend, Merja. It was an opulent, candlelit place with 3.6 metre high ceilings, bear skin rugs, a baby grand piano, miles of oak book shelves and glass cabinets, walls patterned with antique axes, hammers and scythes and, in the sitting room -- where warm Karelian pies, cheese and nettle pastries, and freshly-baked *spanakopita* were waiting for us-- an old orange and white jukebox from the 1960s featuring records by a myriad of Finnish artists, as well as the obligatory Toto platter ("Don't Chain My Heart"). The song that was playing as we walked in sounded exactly like "All the Young Dudes" by Mott the Hoople, only with a Finnish singer and Finnish words. Because Merja's cottage was strange and extravagant -- and because it was the middle of the night and the wind could be heard howling through the trees -- the song sounded evermore like the soundtrack to an odd dream. Merja told me that the singer's name was Hector, and that he was very famous in Finland. When I asked her what the song was about, she said that it was the singer's plea to his troubled friend not to take his own life, but, "In the end, he does," she said, defeatedly. "I don't know if you know, but there are many songs like this in Finland."

After gorging ourselves on home cooking, Merja showed us to our quarters: a warm, wood-paneled room with huge mattresses and thick blankets, where we slept as good as death. We awoke after twelve hours to breakfast served at a long table in the piano room with fine china and crystal glasses, feasting on porridge, grain bread, salami, five different local cheeses, eggs, marinated whitefish and a continuing procession of Karelian pies. And then, we were shown to the sauna.

Saunas are everywhere in Finland. Mikko had one, Pol had one, Tellaka had one. I remember watching television in the hotel in Hameenlinna and coming across a film showing fifteen naked pre-teens cavorting in the woods. Fearing that I'd happened upon child pornography, I realized that it was a Finnish film, and that they were headed to a sauna, where the kids sat around, read books and had a great old time.

For Finns aged eight to eighty, the sauna is a way of life. 2002 statistics showed that there were 2 million saunas in a country of just over 5 million. At one time, pretty much the entire world used the sauna as a means of staying clean-- the Russians had their *bayna*, the Turks their *hamam*, the Japanese their *onsen* -- but because of certain forces -- like the Reformation, which obliterated the sauna in greater Europe, or the destruction of the sweat lodge through the genocide of native people in North America -- the sauna survived in only a few of the world's enclaves. For most Finns who lived and worked in the country, the sauna provided a place that was warm, germ-free and social, especially in the brutal winter months. It was where women gave birth and doctors tended to patients-- many corpses were prepared for burial there -- and while the bath-houses of the world fell prey to the inevitable sins of the flesh, the Finns adhered to the dictum, *"Jokaisen on kayttaydyttava saunaaa samalla tavalla kuin kirkossa"* ("In the sauna, one must conduct himself as he would in a church"). Not to besmirch a grand national pastime, but leave it to the Finns to take the grindy-grindy out of a bunch of nude people getting together.

It was hard not to feel a certain commune with nature as Al, Mikko and I walked down a set of stairs behind the schoolhouse to a wooden shack nestled in a bramble overlooking the Kumi River. There was a late-autumn bite to the air, which made the sensation all the more profound as we got out of our clothes in the chilled outer room, then climbed starkers into the sauna proper, where Mikko ladled water over a bunch of rocks, which emitted a steamy sigh before giving way to great gathering heat. A slow process of wonderful suffocation crested with beads of sweat covering pretty much my entire body. As I sat there still as a potted plant on the cedar bench, the steam pushed its way into my lungs and pores and I approached that feeling of heady release promised by saunians the world over, exfoliating to the nth degree. This was a fine sensation until, after a few minutes, I realized that I was nearly drowning in my own secretions. When I looked over at Al, I noticed that he'd fallen silent, robbed of his personality in an attempt to survive the heat. Mikko, for his part, seemed to lose the ability to create long, colourful stories out of even the smallest detail, drawing his legs to his chest and staring at his toes. Because the others had become so withdrawn, I dwelled on the fact that I was sweatier than Iggy Pop, and really, how wet and uncomfortable I felt. I asked Mikko: "Has anyone ever put a television in here? A DVD player? A radio? Maybe, some old *Hockey Digests*?" Mikko chuckled and told me that no one had, and that the whole idea was to relax and let the world peel away while you stewed in your own fluids. I was reminded of something Mikko's brother-in-law, Pol, had told me during our afternoon drive around Helsinki: "A typical Finn would like nothing more than to go into the forest in the winter, take a sauna and sit by himself for hours." This sentiment was echoed by a woman I'd met in Kuopio, who said that her dream vacation was "to go up to Lapland with my father, and say no more than six words to each other."

As the temperature inside the sauna neared 60 degrees C, Al, desperate for a breath, climbed down from the bench and ensured that the single enduring memory from my most culturally significant moment in Finland would be the sight of my friend's sweaty ass cooling in the corridor (it was at this point that I also discovered another very Finnish quality to the sauna: the process of getting terribly sweaty without having to do anything exciting to get terribly sweaty). After awhile, we poured buckets of water over our heads, wrapped ourselves in towels and walked outside. Feeling the leaves and branches crunch under my feet, we made our way down to the Kumi, where I stood like Matti Nykanen in my bath towel and let the wind tickle my berries. While I'd been momentarily repelled by the heat and sweat, the feeling of standing half-nude in the rich Finnish wilderness proved to be a pretty great reprieve from the smoky clubs where Al and I had played the previous three nights. It was all I could do to hold myself back from shouting "Cow's vagina!" to the birds and fish. I was engulfed in a feeling of total submission and relaxation, but instead of embracing true Finnishness and wandering off into the bramble to die, I made my way back to Merja's cottage, poured consecutive cups of delicious coffee, and let this looseness of body and mind give way to a torrent of writing, which I did while sitting in a plush, big-armed chair below a 100 year old birch canoe hanging overhead.

Cradled, as I was, deep in the Finnish countryside, it seemed like a good time to ponder the differences and similarities between Finns and Canadians. On first blush, studying Finland was a lot like staring into a mirror, but after a handful of days in the world's second-most literate nation, a few distortions started to appear. The characteristics that my country and Mikko's shared, I thought, were largely cosmetic-- the endless wonder and beauty of the land, the poise of the cities and propriety of its citizens, the slow, careful emergence of an indigenous culture, and the ubiquitous moose antlers that hung above the entranceway to Merja's dining room. Other than that, I wasn't sure that Canadians were terribly like the Finns at all. Finnish people, I thought, were how Canadians saw themselves, but weren't: quiet, clean, friendly, timid, unflinching. Canadians are often self-characterized as skittish North American mice cast against the oafish Americans, but compared to the Finns, we were loud and loutish, reckless and rude. Whenever Al and I waded among Mikko and his friends, I felt far more brash and extroverted than I ever had at home. Through this, I came to appreciate the Americaness of my personality; how living so close to such a bombastic country had helped coax the vigour and personality out of me, as a Canadian. Previously, I'd seen the quiet reserve of Canadians as virtuous, but watching it dominate the Finns' personality, I worried whether too much northern introspection was unhealthy, reflected, as it was, in the Finns' suicide songs, their search for solitude in a place that was very empty to begin with, and their cultural isolationism in the face of bordering Russian and Swedish influences. And considering that, while the Finns were the most coffee-obsessed people on Earth-- drinking nine cups a day on average-- they were also the least verbal, *Suomi* struck me as an emotionally unhealthy place, at least until our tiny rock and roll caravan headed east and reached the small bohemian city of Joensuu, which, for the sake of Finland's literary portrait, arrived not a moment too soon.

Approaching the Hotel Jokela -- the site of our last Finnish gig -- the first person I noticed was an African woman staring out of the window of the bar. At first, I thought she was a Finnish woman wearing a shroud, but when we walked up the steps of the old hotel and turned into the bar, I saw her sitting with friends in one of the tavern's old red leather booths, their table busy with glasses even though it was only late afternoon. The entire tavern was filled with people, and, for the first time all trip, high and lively with voices. Instead of patrons quietly deliberating their own mortality, the men and women of the Hotel Jokela seemed to be arguing and telling jokes. Not only that, but the setting spoke volumes: dark, creaking floorboards, fat clouds of cigarette smoke, a cranky jukebox, and a television that looked like it had to be hit with a stick to work. Like most honest taverns, the Jokela had photos hanging on the walls of people drinking there seventy years ago; even more genuinely, a few of these patrons were still around, having tipped ales from the day the Jokela first opened in 1927 to the moment Al and I showed up to present our pesky CanFolk repertoire. Since the hotel only staged shows once a month-- and because we were the first Western performers to play there-- I felt privileged to be part of the life of the building, and made a mental note to myself to try and not suck.

On the other side of the hotel entrance was a lounge and a smaller bar where a tinfoil basket filled with delicious fried whitefish sat waiting for us on a little table, complimented with a pitcher of iced orange juice. Beyond that was the Hotel's live room-- the Sointu-- where more red-leather booths and tables with white tablecloths faced an open area with a juke joint piano and two modest speaker towers, almost like a little jazz lounge. Walking into the room, we saw that a small, dark man with brown teeth wearing a beautiful suit was sitting at the piano: Kemal Achourbekov, the hotel's Azerbaijani pianist. After quick introductions, we gathered in the lounge, where we destroyed the basket of whitefish -- it was immediately replaced by another -- and listened to the story of the building told by those who lived and worked there.

Heidi and Hannu-- who, for some reason, insisted that we call him Charlie-- were the middle-aged proprietors of the Jokela. Bespectacled and neatly groomed, Charlie's dry wit and gravitas held the business together, while Heidi was the radiant matron in whom the bar staff-- including their daughter Anita-- sought guidance (at the end of the evening, everyone followed Heidi to the

Giggling Marlin, an abysmal late-night dance bar, while Charlie went home to sleep. The next morning, Charlie greeted us in the morning with a hangover tincture while Heidi spent the day in bed). In 1928, Charlie's grand-parents were married in the bar, so his family had a deep connection to the place. During the Second World War, the Hotel Jokela was the only building in the region with a telephone. Because the Finns had aligned with Germany to fight the Russians, the Hotel often harboured German soldiers, creating a social powderkeg. Once, after a drunken German officer tried to strong-arm a local woman into his bed, one of the young men of Joensuu took exception, resulting in a terrible knife fight, which resulted in the German soldier lying in a pool of blood on the tavern's floor. Many years later, another visitor to the Jokela was equally smitten, in this case actor Omar Sharif, who was filming *Doctor Zhivago* a few miles outside of town. Even though he was expected to stay with the rest of his ensemble at a larger hotel in town, Sharif spent his time at the tavern with Lisse, one of the Jokela's beautiful young waitresses. Sharif and Lisse carried out their romantic tryst in fabled Room Number 4, which Charlie would occasionally show to visitors.

Kemal was the latest global wanderer to have found a home under the Jokela's old tin roof. With dark, riveting eyes and a bulldog's jawline, Kemal's life story could have been lifted from a novel by Turgenev or Dostoevsky. As a musical prodigy growing up in Azerbaijan, Kemal had had a reasonably happy young life until, like a lot of gifted children, his love of performing was nearly quashed by an abusive music teacher. Taking extreme measures, he fled, as a teenager, to Moscow, where he took the Moscow Academy of Music exam sight unseen, and passed. After rising through the ranks of brilliant young players, he graduated, then found temporary work playing at social events, including palace concerts for Brezhnev's daughter, who, Kemal remembered, "was always very drunk, very loud. I could have played any music in the world, but she wanted to hear mostly crazy gypsy songs and drinking music."

After a time, Kemal was required to put in his military service, at which point his life took a wild spin. "My troop commander was a very vain and jealous man," he recalled, sipping a glass of wine and glazing over at the memory. "After he discovered that he had a famous musician in his ranks, he decided to organize a concert in Chernobyl, in the Ukraine, in an attempt to impress his fellow officers. He pulled me out of the barracks and put me on a train to Chernobyl, where I played on the very evening the Nuclear Power Plant exploded. At the time, nobody told us anything. They kept it a secret, so it was hard to know what had really happened. There was a young ballet company who also performed that night, and the flowers they were given after their show were radiant and glowing in the darkness of their hotel room. I know this, because they invited the other performers to their room to see it. Even though the plant was twenty-minutes outside of town, the whole city was overcome with the poison of radiation."

Mikko, who'd joined us for the interview, said that his friend Jari-- who would later accompany us to St. Petersburg-- had had a similar experience while attending university in Kiev. When I met Jari in Russia, he told me the story first hand.

"Three days after the disaster," he remembered, "all of the Finns were evacuated from Kiev, as well as other nationalities (except, of course, those from the Third World). Two weeks later, I was called to Moscow to take the entrance test for the Russian Film Academy. During the test, I was accused of showing non-solidarity with the Soviet Union because I didn't stay in Kiev after the Chernobyl accident, which happened only 80 km from the city. They decided to take me in as a student, but only after I asked why my interviewers hadn't traveled to Chernobyl or Kiev themselves."

"When I arrived in Kiev to do my final exams in May, the town looked the same, but there was something strange going on. After awhile, I realized that there were no children in the streets (they were all evacuated) and that everyone was drunk. When I went to my dorm, my Ukrainian room-mate Jura opened the door and started yelling at me: "You fucking idiot! Why did you come back?! It's not safe here!" Before letting me in, I had to take my clothes off and shower to wash away whatever radiation I might have picked up along the way. After the shower, I was

forced to drink *samagon* (Russian moonshine), which people in Kiev were told would protect them from radiation. Jura told me that his friend of his -- a fireman --was among the first rescuers who went to Chernobyl, and that four out of five crew members got drunk before the operation. The one who didn't had died, and this became legend, so everybody started drinking. Mothers all around Soviet Union were making *samagon* and giving it to their sons and daughters. Jura had already received twenty bottles of *samagon* from his mother, and, in a way, Kiev in those days had turned into a Russian paradise."

I asked Kemal if he'd been directly affected by the radiation, but he folded his hands into a tent, and said, "No, not personally. But some of the people I was with that night lost all of their hair, others became impotent, others suffered different ailments. The day after the explosion, we were scheduled to perform at the power plant, but no one expected that we would go. Still, because information about what had happened was so hard to get, they put us on a bus and we drove to the plant, where we sat for twenty minutes baking in the radiation before turning back."

After Kemal's release from the army, he met a Finnish woman who brought him to the Jokela, and that's how he ended up eating fried whitefish and telling his story to two hosers so giddy from having met a Russian/Finnish/ Azerbaijani musician in the lounge of one of the world's greatest taverns that they would be spurred on to their best performance of the tour, realizing that encounters like these are why anyone ever leaves their house for the frontier of world travel.

While it was as much a case of finally managing to get my voice around another of Finland's scrappy, low wattage sound systems-- and the fact that my strumming hand no longer balled up into a claw of nerves and worry upon starting my set-- the success of my performance went largely beyond my own skronk and yowl. I owe much of the evening's success, in fact, to Wendy from Zambia-- the African woman whom I'd seen staring out the window when we arrived. Wendy was as tall and thin as a dandelion, with firefly eyes. When I took to the stage-- which, like the storefront gig in Jyvaskala, wasn't a stage so much as a space that had been cleared away at the end of the room -- I was greeted by Wendy and a tableful of chatty Finns sitting near the front. Were this any country other than Finland, I would have seen these people as the solo artist's bane -- the kind of people for whom the quiet parts of dramatic songs are the ideal times to ask friends about long lost relatives or discuss global economics -- but because it was the first room we'd played that had immediate life and energy, I knew that it would be a different kind of evening.

As I started my set, the chattering stopped until the end of my first song, at which point Wendy and her friends began peppering me with questions from the floor about my guitar, Canada, my journey around Finland, and my hat. I welcomed their intrusiveness. One of the struggles of playing solo is the necessity to constantly tune and retune one's acoustic guitar-- lacking a veil of fuzz, its wonky harmonics are often laid bare -- a routine that sometimes results, at least for me, in long dead spots in the set, which, in front of crowds as quiet and observant as those in Finland, felt as interminable as side three of "Tusk." In other instances, I'd had to think of witty patter while tuning -- provided I hadn't already made fun of Matti Nykanen -- but in Joensuu, I was too busy verbally pingponging with Wendy and her friends to notice that tuning my guitar took any time at all. One of her tablemates -- someone who'd been described to me as a famous Finnish writer -- asked if I knew how to play any Van Morrison songs, but I told him, furtively keeping an eye on my tuner's light: "Sorry, I don't do fat Irish leprechauns." He laughed outrageously; so did Wendy. Things kept rolling on from there.

Before playing "My First Rock Concert," I asked Wendy to name hers. Instead of answering straight away, she stood up at the table, rotated to look at the crowd behind her, turned back to the stage, forced her arms into the air and shouted "Miriam Makeba!" before proceeding to sing some Miriam Makeba. I managed to stop her before she sang the entire song. Still, she continued standing during "My First Rock Concert," providing operatic harmonies and waving her arms as if being attacked by bats. These impromptu vocal arrangements happened over pretty much the entire set. Afterwards, Wendy got to me before I'd unplugged my guitar and commanded, "Hug

now, please!" Later on at the bar, she asked if she could draw something in my book, and when she handed it back to me, I saw that it was a sketch of a nude woman with enormous breasts with the words, "Loving you always" scribbled below. Even later, she demanded another hug, but this came with some pelvic grinding, so I peeled myself away and thanked her for all of her support.

Alas, there would be no legend of Room number 2.

Kemal joined Al and I at the end of Al's set. His frame was even smaller set against the black piano, but his arms spanned the whole of the instrument, his fingers dancing across the keyboard like fish splashing in a stream. It was obvious from the first note that he was a real player, a virtuoso. When the time came for him to take a solo in the last song of the evening -- "Horses" -- the piano exploded in a storm of melody. Hunched over, his shoulders pinched the air as he landed heavy, then light, then heavy again across the battered keys. After his first twelve-bar solo, we cheered him on to another, then another, then another, until a smile permanently creased across his face, which, during our interview, seemed subdued and a little pained. Atypically Finnish, the crowd barked and rallied behind him, their voices growing louder and more excited with each solo. Wendy shot out of her seat, but resisted trying to sing above the frenzy. The whole scene was one of the beautiful moments that only music can produce: the former Azerbaijani child prodigy who'd been shepherded to his near-death during one of the world's worst nuclear accidents playing a Canadian protest song about worker's rights and the demise of prairie justice for a raucous Finnish rock and roll crowd led by a tall, drunken Zambian flower. For the first time in my life, the Rheostatics seemed like an afterthought.

At song's end, Kemal, Al and I crashed into the final chord, smiling as it faded away. Afterwards, we drank until we were sore. Before collapsing face-first into our pillows, Heidi poured us shots of a dangerous pink liqueur that can only be described as tasting like sweet liquid bacon. Of course, they insisted upon pouring us another, but I demurred, to which Al whirled around and shouted incredulously:

"How often do we get to come to wherever the fuck we are?!?"

I admitted that he had a point.

And then we went to Russia.

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