

Tale of Two Buskers

Two brothers, one visiting the other, relax on a crowded beach at night. They exchange tales from when, someplace far, far away, they once grew up together. The younger brother reminds the older of the holes they used to dig together during school vacations on North Atlantic shores that, according to their father, were bound for “China”. The older nods, needing no reminder – it was the tale he was going to tell next – pleased his brother remembers, too.

The sky is clouded with fireworks’ gunpowder, popping and crackling over breaking waves. It’s the older brother’s turn to tell a story. Remembering how earlier that night the younger brother said he’d never been anywhere in the world where it was so legal to drink in public so indiscreetly, he now thinks about how nice it is that fireworks are legal here, too. Even though, he says, sharing the thought with his younger brother, it would be nice to see the stars. But it’s still his turn to tell a story. The younger brother sits up. It’s warm for May, but windy on the ground, and both brothers, already out of beer, are underdressed.

They walk to where most of the people are: the promenade, between the city and the sand. Along it, locals in striped shirts holding hands or drinks walk by or stop to take pictures or videos of any number of the various street performers – musicians, magicians, dancers, caricature artists, Turkish ice cream men, skateboarders, toddlers out past their bedtimes clumsily taking on the masses, pyrotechnics – so that they can view them later, judge good take from bad and share the best with the rest of the world. Some performers have drawn dense, inordinately supportive crowds layers upon layers deep, as if they are their own inordinately successful performer alter-egos from a parallel universe, for whose talents people everywhere have paid to line up, ensuring their hero never has to stoop to busking again. Others mostly draw mere glances from passers-by, the occasional picture captured whilst moving, processed blurry, later to be

deleted, never shared nor reconsidered. One such relatively ignored busker, a local whose current crowd is two, and whose striped shirt extends out from underneath his half-unzipped hooded sweatshirt, is sitting on a box in the sand, acoustic guitar and microphone plugged into a small sound system behind him, singing a melody the brothers find familiar. They look at one another and sit, doubling the busker's audience.

The steps they are sitting on extend the length of the promenade, which extends the length of the beach. The song is an American classic, "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright" by Bob Dylan, but the lyrics the busker is singing have been translated into Korean. The brothers hesitantly sing along in English, unsure which verse the Korean is singing in Korean, singing as they guess, further hesitating to verify with each other in fraternal telepathy, when their guesses don't agree, whose guess is right. A toddler runs across the sand behind the busker as the older brother takes a picture.

The younger brother stops trying to sing to comment that the box the busker is sitting on is actually a cajón. A what? A cajón, the younger brother says. The brothers sing the final line of the song together, conveniently the same lyric that ends every verse. The two others in the crowd are locals in striped shirts, a middle-aged man holding a cigarette to his mouth, and a middle-aged woman holding the man's other arm tightly with both of hers. The busker stops playing. He says thank you in the local language and then says thank you in English, which draws laughter from the middle-aged Korean couple, and from the brothers. Into the microphone, he asks them, where are you from?

"I am American," the older brother answers in Korean.

A young local man smoking a cigarette sits down near the brothers and takes out his phone. The crowd is now five.

"Ah," the busker says. "American."

"He is our younger brother," the older brother adds in Korean.

The busker laughs loudly into the microphone, appealing to the middle-aged couple, inviting them to join in on the fun, and they do: they laugh, too.

"I can play American song," he says in English. "What do want hear?"

The brothers look at one another and guess silently they are thinking

the same thing. The older brother speaks for them, in a slow, carefully constructed broken English he hopes he won't have to repeat.

"We like... this one," he says. "This one you... just... played."

The busker laughs and says thank you in Korean and again in English. He asks again if the brothers want to hear an American song, and if any in particular.

"We like the last one you played," the older brother says.

The busker smiles at the middle-aged couple, his countrymen.

"Okay," he says. "American song."

The young local man on his phone next to the brothers gets up with his phone to his ear and walks onto the sand. A few locals stop walking to take pictures of the busker speaking English into the microphone. In their minds, the brothers go through the possible American songs this busker could play next that are more American than the one he just played. They look at each other and understand without speaking that they both have concluded there are no possibilities.

The busker's choice is a newly released, unambiguous pop song about love and sex in Los Angeles. The older brother wonders whether it's the first acoustic version of Maroon 5's "One More Night" he's heard, of all the times he's stopped for buskers in Korea. Neither brother tries to sing along.

By the end of the song, the busker's crowd has doubled to eight. The four new crowd members aim their camera phones at the busker, with unwavering diligence, as if the performance, from now on, couldn't exist without them. The brothers applaud. The younger asks the older if he wants to leave, if he wants to go find a trashcan to throw out their beer cans, or get new ones. One more song, the older says. The younger brother understands the older brother's sympathies towards the busker; if they leave now, the busker might take it the wrong way and think that they didn't like his playing or his choice of song, especially when he had chosen this song specifically for them, and if they, the Americans, didn't like the American song "One More Night" enough to stay for one more song, then the locals watching on their phones who couldn't understand the English lyrics could only be staying for one more song out of politeness, and this would all make the busker feel very, very, unfairly insecure about his playing, his art, his choice to devote countless hours of his life to perfecting

his act as a glorified beggar, every choice he's ever made, everything. The younger brother understood this immediately.

The man on the sand, hanging up his phone, jogs towards the busker. A new song has begun. The man reaches behind the sound system, pulls out a second cajón, sits on it, and immediately begins drumming. There are no lyrics yet. The brothers whisper to each other, trying to guess the song from its melody. The man, the cajónist, takes out his phone while drumming, drumming with one hand, reading something on his phone, typing on his phone with the other. The older brother takes ten pictures of the busking duo that would be identical but for one little girl out past her bedtime running behind the buskers in the sand. The song's lyrics are in Korean. The melody feels familiar, but neither brother can place it. It's no Dylan song, and by the seriousness of the busker on this one (the singing busker, not the cajónist still on his phone) – singing his heart out, the younger brother comments – it's no novel American song translated, either. The older brother scrolls through the pictures he's just taken. He wants to delete nine and keep one. He asks his younger brother to help him judge the good takes from the bad. His younger brother says they're all good. His younger brother's right.

The crowd's swelled to ten by the end of the song. One more song, the older brother says. The younger brother asks if he wants to get more beers afterwards, or food, or keep walking, perhaps check out another busker. The cajónist finally puts his phone away.

The singer stands up and says something in Korean that the small crowd laughs at. He starts strumming violently to the beat of the cajónist, who's just now given him his full attention. The song ends; the crowd's still an even ten. One more song, the older brother says. A bunch of toddlers out past their bedtime wearing identical striped shirts run across the sand, behind the two buskers. The younger brother laughs. One more song, he agrees.

At some point, it gets dark. At some point, my brother's friends arrive, and then it gets dark. We spend the day in the sand, waiting for all my brother's friends to arrive one by one. They arrive two at a time, until there are six of them, eight of us, altogether. At some point, but at different points, we all dunk in what for all of us at some point was a faraway ocean.

We all drink, get drunk, and then at some point, it gets dark.

The same buskers are out again, the same magician, the same musicians, the same pyrotechnics. The minstrel who played along to an accordion recording backing track all night last night is back in the same spot by the aquarium stairs. The magician with the megaphone is back in the same spot, as well, with what (what with the lines of volunteers he's forming) appears to be the same act. Tonight seems no busier than last; there is the same amount of people. But there is a difference. The same buskers from last night, the "Don't Think Twice" and "One More Night" buskers, who are out again, in their same spot on the sand between the restrooms and the convenience store, have drawn a remarkably larger crowd. Actually, it's huge. It might be the biggest on the beach.

I have to think they're playing the same set. My brother has already noticed, already telling his friends how we saw them play the same set last night to no more than ten people, including us. His friends express skepticism, a refuge for disinterest, perhaps, but I back my brother up anyway. It's definitely the same set, I verify.

We're all holding empty cans. At some point earlier, we'd begun discussing what my brother had informed me is the well-known Korean trashcan paradox: how the country keeps so clean with so few trashcans. Maybe everyone just buries their trash in the sand, one of my brother's friends says suddenly, restarting the discussion. And in Seoul? Maybe they donate it to the Ministry of Land, and then the Ministry of Land makes a big pile and builds a big park on top of it. The Ministry of Land, my brother explains, is a real thing. But I think it's more likely Koreans just bring trash bags with them everywhere they go, he says, and then suggests we all go watch the buskers for a few, maybe find a trashcan, get some more beers.

The buskers' crowd tonight surrounds them. We get as close as we can, behind the buskers, on the sand. The entire crowd is singing along in English to a song that sounds familiar but that I don't know. My brother begins singing, too. His friends, too. Only then do I recognize what song it is: "Let It Go" from the animated movie *Frozen*. It's a song that, earlier today, on the beach, after dunking, with a ukulele and two plastic bottles filled with rocks and shells, two of my brothers' friends and I played, too. It's a song that, earlier in the week, in Seoul, following our musical

performance for them, my brother's students sang for us a cappella.

But the insertion of this one song, this slight set change, cannot possibly explain alone how their crowd has multiplied like so. It's possible their sound system is slightly larger; it's possible I'm mistaken. It's possible the cajónist has chosen to take things more seriously tonight and laid off his phone; it's more likely the cajónist's unprofessional phone-play last night was the result of a meager audience, and not the other way around. It's Korean culture, my brother says. See a crowd, join a crowd. See a line, whatever's at the end of it must be worth the wait.

The buskers' next song is in Korean. The crowd seems to know this one, too, and my brother and his friends don't. I tell my brother to hold on, wait here while I run to the bathroom real quick, and look for a trashcan. I walk around the crowd, up the steps to the promenade. The singing busker is standing; the cajónist is sitting. I identify with the cajónist. I wonder where all these people were yesterday; if they'd all come yesterday, would the buskers have had this same crowd yesterday?

On my way to the bathroom, instead of a trashcan, I find a pile of trash. Its location on the promenade is a seemingly arbitrary one. I think of the buskers beginning and the growth of their audience – one person sitting, another following, another following, a couple here, two brothers there, and so on – and wonder, who littered first, who put the first piece of trash down? And then, who put the second?

There's a line for the ladies' room, and none for the men's. Standing over the urinal, I get the idea to go back to the pile of trash and retrieve my empty can. I will put it someplace new, someplace where it will be alone, a piece of trash without a pile, and watch what happens. I will solve the paradox.