

I recently bought a book of short stories, *Brooklyn Noir 2*, a collection of short stories about the borough. I re-read for the first time in years, Thomas Wolfe's famous short story, "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn."

The story is remarkable and well known for a few reasons. First, it is written entirely in dialect -- Brooklynese, and that is one of the main reasons it is well known. Also, it is funny in a slightly mysterious way. The plot is almost non-existent: Four guys standing on a subway platform discuss, at times heatedly, how to get to Bensonhurst ("Bensonhoist" in dialect). This gives the story a somewhat Beckett-like atmosphere.

For those of you who have never read it, this is an utterly unsatisfactory summary: An unnamed narrator tells the story -- a "big guy" asks how to go to Bensonhurst; a "little guy" doesn't know; the narrator explains how to go; a "wise guy" pipes in with a different route, angering the narrator; the big guy and the narrator get on a train; the narrator discovers that the big guy wants to go to Bensonhurst "jus ... to see duh place." The big guy produces a map of Brooklyn and explains he wants to see all the parts of Brooklyn on the map. The narrator thinks the big guy is insane for riding out to different parts of Brooklyn, just to see them. The narrator decides that big guy is so strange, that he gets off the train before his stop.

The most famous line in the story, which seems to express the narrator's belief that the big guy's mission is insanely hopeless, is stated at the beginning: "Dere's no guy livin dat knows Brooklyn t'roo an' t'roo, because it'd take a guy a lifetime just to find his way aroun' duh f----- town." But it is repeated in slightly modified way at the end: "It'd take a guy a lifetime to know Brooklyn t'roo an' t'roo. An' even den, yuh wouldn't know it all."

What I find really striking about reading the story this time is that I have no clue, whatsoever, what this story is about. Don't get me wrong: I really love the story; it's just that I no longer think that the story is about what I used to think it was about. And curiously, after Googling the story title, I don't think anyone has put forward a convincing theory of what Wolfe was trying to say.

Conventionally, I have always understood the story to mean that Brooklyn is so big and diverse that you could never learn the whole place in you lifetime. But that's a really trite observation for someone like Wolfe. Some Google results are more dubious: one writer says the story is about some guys who don't know how to get to Bensonhurst. But -- and this is real inside Brooklyn knowledge -- one peculiar, funny and ultimately mysterious aspect of the story is that when the narrator and the wise guy argue about how to get to Bensonhurst by train, they are both correct, because the NY subway system tends to be massively redundant. (My father used to work for the subway system, and if you asked him how to get anywhere, he would think through the maze of lines and give you about six ways to get anywhere. It's kind of a NY obsession: if anyone asks on the subway how to get somewhere, all the nearby passengers give the philosophical take on the various ways to get to where you are going.)

Another interpretation is that it is about a guy who doesn't quite understand the difference between a map of Brooklyn and the real Brooklyn. But that can't be right, because the big guy with the map has made it a hobby to go to all the places that interest him on the map.

Another possibility is that Wolfe was just doing an exercise in dialect and dialogue. Wolfe was a southerner who lived in Brooklyn, and he must have been intrigued by a regional dialect almost as dense as the southern dialects; and perhaps he just overheard this funny conversation and argument and decided to record it.

But I think the story is about curiosity and its absence. The narrator ridicules the big guy for wanting to know about Brooklyn. He is clearly an unreliable narrator -- somewhat narrow-minded, dismissive and incurious. He thinks about the dangers the big guy has already faced to gain his knowledge -- wandering around the bars of Red Hook, for example -- and decides it is definitely not worth it. In fact, it is not even worth being in the same subway car with such a nut. The line at the beginning and end, as well as a strange argument the two men have about drowning in Brooklyn, subtly link knowledge or the pursuit of knowledge, and death. Wolfe subtly changes the repeated line at the beginning and end from third person to second person -- "even den, yuh wouldn't know it all"-- addressing "you" the reader. For the narrator, it just not worth it, but for the big guy, just the beauty of knowing Brooklyn, or really life, is worth it, even if we all end of dead in the end anyway.