

WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

With the popular success of the musical *Be More Chill*, I decided to read the 2004 Ned Vizzini novel on which it was based. It's an entertaining science fiction story about a teenager who implants a computer chip in his brain to help him become popular. What was most surprising to me was that the story was set in Metuchen. The Metuchen of the novel seemed largely constructed from Google Maps, but there it was: our moody teenage cyborg walking at midnight down Route 27 past Friendly's!

I remember a student of mine wrote a fan letter to Ned Vizzini. The author wrote back a cheerful, encouraging letter — and four weeks later Vizzini committed suicide by leaping from the window of his parents' apartment building. We kept a copy of Vizzini's letter on the bulletin board all year long as a literary memorial.

Reading *Be More Chill* today I notice how its language — the popular culture of 2004 (Eminem, Britney Spears) — already feels dated. And I was reminded of this erosion when my neighbor Howie came up to me the other morning and said: "I overheard this conversation with a 20-year-old woman at work yesterday that left her completely confused. An older co-worker told her: 'Call me back at your convenience; after all, it's *on your dime*.' She'd never heard anybody say that before. You know why?"

"She's never used a payphone."

"She's never even *seen* a payphone."

"Buy her a box of carbon paper for her birthday. *That'll* confuse her."

"There's another thing," said Howie. "People her age put 'cc' on an email. They have no idea it means 'carbon copy.' I'm telling you, Robert, you gotta write about this. And you gotta give me credit."

My friend Tony, who teaches at Rutgers, said he'd tried using the word "Orwellian" in class last semester. He might as well have been speaking Swedish. He heard an even deeper silence when he tried: "Your fifteen minutes are up"; "I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore"; and "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

When Tony and I go out for lunch, no matter where we are and what we order, when we thank the young waiter for bringing our entrées, the reply is always "No problem." It is never "You're welcome" — that phrase seem to have been scrubbed from the consciousness of those under 40. This inevitably makes Tony and me laugh because, to our silvered ears, these words don't remotely mean the same thing. *You're welcome* implies: I'm-happy-to-be-performing-the-job-I'm-being-paid-to-do. *No problem* suggests: I've-taken-a-few-minutes-out-of-my-more-interesting-obligations-to-do-you-a-favor.

Language changes, and these objections no doubt feel like peevishness to the generation that buys automobiles on their cell-phones. And, in fairness here, let me acknowledge there are 10,000 things *they* could reference that would send me searching for my Swedish dictionary.

In the last year I taught, remember students asking me, “How much more time is there in the period?” I pointed to the clock — then suddenly, startlingly, realized they couldn’t read an analog clock. These were 12th grade AP English Literature students, and they couldn’t read an old-fashioned school clock. And, of course, why should they be able to? They’d told time their entire lives by looking at their phones.

Life goes on. In twenty years everything I know, love, and understand will probably be hanging in an antique store — suspended inside glass bell jars: my Duncan Imperial yo-yo, my sock monkey, my manual thermostat, my lucky pen knife, my pocket magnifier bought from the Edmund Scientific Company, my hardback copy of *The Complete Lyrics of Lorenz Hart*, my desert boots, my social security card—and visitors to this shopworn museum will find me sitting behind a glass wall, part of the diorama of the past: I’m holding a ballpoint pen, writing in a school notebook. They’ll tap on the glass and ask if I’d mind if they took a selfie with me. I’ll reply, though the glass, “No problem.”