Listen, son, you have to understand: everything was different, and everything’s the same. That’s the secret of life, and it takes most people their entire lives to learn it, and most people never learn it. Actually, it isn’t the secret of life, it’s the secret to dealing with the ways we’ll never understand anything. My advice is simple: don’t worry about it, because when it’s all over either everything will be explained to us or nothing happens at all. Either way, we’re covered.

We smoked in movie theaters when I was growing up. You can’t do that now. For one thing, no one smokes; for another, no one goes to movies anymore, do they? Can you imagine the sissies of your generation smoking on an airplane? Can you imagine a new mother, today, if somebody lit up next to her? Did you know lawsuits used to be a last resort? Can you imagine eating red meat at least once a day? Can you imagine not counting the number of cocktails you had each week because no one kept count? Can you imagine a world where nobody exercised but no one was fat? Can you imagine a world where you had to marry certain types of women before you could have sex with them? Can you imagine when getting in a fight meant using your fists and not typing words onto a screen? Can you imagine life without insect repellant? Can you imagine a world where there was no such thing as therapy or depression (unless you were rich), and if you couldn’t handle reality they put you in an institution? Have you figured out that shame keeps people in line more than any laws ever could? Do you think a car needing fuel ever complained that the gasoline didn’t taste good?

Do you understand what I’m saying?

Can you believe we used to eat bologna and processed cheese, and white bread wasn’t an adjective or a statement? Did you know we didn’t know what irony was? Did you know that not being able to change your oil or fix a flat tire or repair a leaky faucet meant you couldn’t call yourself a
man? Can you call yourself a man? Did you know no one used to be gay? But if you wore cologne you were a queer? Can you imagine that armpit sweat and rings around the collar weren’t embarrassing but badges of honor? Do you understand that if skin cancer is the price you pay for not wearing sunscreen, so be it? Can you imagine a world where people didn’t like, or trust, color TV? Did you know newspapers used to be delivered in the afternoon? Can you believe professional athletes in the ‘50s had to get second jobs to make ends meet? Did you realize there was no such thing as endangered species? Can you picture a world where priests were more respected than actors? Do you realize there’s never been any accountability, for anything? Do you understand that’s why people need to believe in God?

Have you figured out that knowing everything doesn’t mean anything?

Did you know wearing a tie to the office was not optional? Or that we used to be able to describe our jobs in one or two words? Rich people have always been assholes—get over it. Could you ever see yourself listening to nine innings on a radio? Can you imagine a world where you canned food instead of freezing it? Did you know we used to be happy when movies had happy endings? Did you know that dogs, just like people who owned them, used to die because there was no money or other options to prolong their lives? Can you believe people used to turn their underwear inside out to use them a second time? Do you think all those fuckers on Wall Street got spanked as kids, or did they get put in time-out? Did you know the military was college for the underclass? Did you know I learned more from kicking someone’s ass than I ever learned in school? Did you know I learned more from getting my ass kicked than anything else? Have you ever had your ass kicked? (We know you’ve never kicked anyone’s ass.)

Do you understand what a toll it takes to love things you don’t want or believe?

Do you understand if fathers talked about everything the way everyone always wants them to, wives and children and friends might like them more but would never respect them? Are you aware this is the sacrifice required when you become a father? Do you know that we figured out how to be fathers and husbands and employees after we already had skin in the game? Do you understand this is why we despise your generation? Do you realize it’s also why we pity you?

Can we agree that if I’ve done my job as a man, and as a father, I won’t have to tell you any of these things?