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## The Leadoff Men

Five hours after the fall, we stretched, loosening the stringy bits that grappled between our bones. We unraveled the knots in our elbows and backs and stomped out the kinks in our knees. And then we played catch.

There was no banter as we threw, no laughter, no teasing, our lingos clogged up by what we'd seen hours earlier. All we could do was think, not about the off-speed pitches we were to break off during our bullpens or the line drives we were to smoke during batting practice, but about the one question no one could have answered even if we would've had the stomachs to ask it—*How will this affect us?*



Earlier that morning, each of our professors turned on the news and let the anchors try to explain what had happened. Macroeconomics—CBS 2. Statistics—NBC 5. Geology—ABC 7. Our American History professor was the only one to ask if we wanted to talk about the things we saw. A moment of silence ensued, one a passer-by might've mistaken for reverence; the reasons for our silence were less noble, however, less sympathetic: we were terrified to ask the question we'd been wondering since the moment we realized the first pilot did what he did on purpose. Our professor waited a few moments, sighed, and flipped to CNN. "All flights have been grounded."



Practice ebbed for about an hour as we ran through the motions, chewing sunflower seeds and Bazooka Joe, tightening and re-tightening our batting gloves, rubbing small dabs of pine tar into the underside of the bills of our hats. Pitchers pronated curveballs and supinated changeups and hitters took to the tee to flick line drives. We stopped grounders and corralled pop-ups, faked bunts and hit cut-off men. We looked like the epitome of America's pastime, only on mute.

As we practiced, our coaches walked amongst us, watching us without analyzing, offering neither criticism nor encouragement. How could they see anything we did that day as good or, more importantly, bad?



About eighteen months earlier, during our senior years of high school, recruiters from each branch of the military had invaded our lunch hours and offered us incentives like free tuition and sign-on bonuses, trying to monetize the last of our formative years in exchange for the trigger fingers that at that point had only been used to scribble out algebraic equations and love notes and to grip two-seam fastballs. We feigned temptation before rejecting the recruiters' overtures for a number of reasons, chief amongst them fear, a terror akin to that which stormed into our thoughts as we laced up our spikes before practice. It was then when one of our pitchers spat into the dirt, slid on his glove, and openly wondered if a military draft would be coming next.

God. A draft.

We'd read *The Things They Carried* in literature class and learned what happened to those dragged into camo. Our age group—eighteen and nineteen—would be first up in the draft order; we'd be the ones ransacked for our strength and sturdiness, if not our willingness, pulled into active duty just months after declining the invite. If the politicians we'd only just become eligible to vote for needed fresh bodies, we'd be the leadoff men.



There was no use in fine-tuning any mechanic that day. There would be no muscle memory, no recollection of what worked. We were elsewhere. Our coach recognized this and blew his whistle, ending practice an hour early. Like grunts, we marched to left field and stretched again, starting with our necks. We rolled our heads to the left, rolled them to the right. Down, and then up.

That's when we saw it: one lonesome plane jetting across the sky. *All flights have been grounded*, we'd remembered. Later, we'd learn that the plane was Air Force One shuttling the president across the flyovers to some secret bunker in Nebraska. But we didn't know that as we stared into the sky, past the birds and the clouds and the tears in our eyes, watching the plane fade away like it had never existed in the first place. Like it wasn't real.

Like our minds were playing tricks on us.