WHO'S ON FIRST?

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[Assignment: Write a narrative that aims at defining something hard to define—for example, when did childhood end, what happened, what changed?]

( 1 ) When we had started playing whiffle ball, the dirt spot we used as home plate was about the size of a shoebox. It was right in front of our back porch steps so it lived up to the name of "home" plate quite well.

( 2 ) I lived at the corner of Robinson Avenue and E. 99th Street. The front of the house faced Robinson Avenue so my backyard, which served as the baseball diamond, was located between E. 99th Street and our neighbor's backyard. The garage and driveway faced E. 99th Street which served as our right field. Because of our garage, centerfield was nonexistent. A large chunk of left field was missing as well because the neighbor's garage was placed there. We did have left center—a ten-foot-wide strip of grass and weeds that separated our garage from our neighbor's. Anything hit here was at least a triple because it took so long to retrieve the ball; mom's garden blocked the direct route to left center so the outfielder had to run around it, then search through the high grass for the ball.

( 3 ) For the bases we used the physical features of the environment as well. The chunk missing from the sidewalk was first. The big oak tree, directly opposite the porch and in front of the garage, was second. The sandbox, created to serve as a soft bottom for a small two-foot-deep pool in the summer, was third. The dirt spot remained as home plate. But after a few summers of seven, eight, and nine-year-old boys running, sliding, and then trampling the fragile spring grass surrounding it, the spot had grown to the size of a card table.

( 4 ) As I stepped up to bat, I dug my foot into the dirt, just as all good baseball players do, and examined the situation. Standing in my driveway, Bob was playing the outfield in right center, Mark was playing shortstop in front of the garden, and Dave was on the mound. Chris had just hit a single that allowed Kevin to move to third. There was one out; we were down by two runs. We had been playing ever since the parade was over but had universally agreed that this would be the last inning—for now. A home run would win the game. Anything that went over the "Blue Monster" (named after the Green Monster at Fenway Park, of course) was an automatic home run. I stepped up to the plate, trusty bat in hand, and stared Dave down. I was ready for anything he could throw at me.

( 5 ) Dave wound up and let her rip; the pitch looked good the second it left his hand. I swung, made contact, and watched the ball sail—straight up. I watched in agony as it began to drift backwards and to the left, going towards my house. It hung in the air for what seemed like the seventh-inning-stretch, allowing Dave to get under the ball and make the play. But he never got the opportunity. What happened was far worse than a single out. The ball caught a wind gust, as whiffle balls are VERY

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sensitive to wind gusts, and sailed onto my upstairs porch. It was the worst thing that could happen to any whiffle ball player; it was what we called a Polish Home Run.

(6) Not only was the Polish Home Run an automatic out, but it was treated as a normal home run, except the runs were subtracted. With two men on base, we lost three runs, and were now down by five, with one out left. Kevin was the next batter, and he promptly popped up for an easy out, ending the game.

(7) Dave, Bob, and Mark had a good laugh at me before they hopped on their bikes, already late for dinner. But before they left, Kevin, Chris, and I managed to challenge them to a rematch immediately after dinner. They accepted, of course, despite the fact that there was school the day after Memorial Day. The weather was too nice; it had to be enjoyed. We managed to play until the street lights came on, and then some. Our parents would be a little upset when we stayed out that late and would ask us dumb questions like "How can you see the ball when it's that dark out?" but we didn't care—we were kids.

(8) To us, being a kid meant whiffle ball, and lots of it. Sure, there was a park at the end of our street, only a five-minute walk. But let's face it, playing there was not nearly as much fun. There was no automatic home run, no side street with cars to avoid, no windows to be broken, no garden to run around, and no Polish Home Run. The games we played were distinctly our games; nobody else played whiffle ball like we did, nobody else ever would.

(9) Whiffle ball was the signature of a neighborhood. Where, when, and how one played whiffle ball made that person a member of an elite group. Just a few streets away, the game could be totally different. I remember playing at these "away" fields and thinking how dumb was the way other kids played the game. Things like pitcher's mound poison and four fouls being an out stick in my mind. I just never thought that those kids probably thought the way I played whiffle ball was dumb. Whiffle ball, however, had more significance than marking a group of friends. The game of whiffle ball, at least the way we played it, is what being a kid was all about.

(10) Being a kid meant rules, rules like washing your hands before dinner, being home before dark, being in bed by nine o'clock, not playing until your homework was finished, not being allowed into Mrs. Such-and-Such's yard. Whiffle ball meant rules too. No stealing, no leadoffs. Don't pitch too fast; the batter had to be able to hit the ball. No called strikes. A hit under a car was an automatic double and so was anything hit into the garden. (You must understand we could not destroy the zucchini. Mom loved her zucchini.) One base on an overthrow. When thrown at the base runner, the ball had to hit him below the shoulders. Home plate was the ENTIRE dirt spot. Ghost men had to be forced home to score and they could be forced out as well.

(11) As in childhood, there were hazards to avoid in whiffle ball—that tree stump a few feet from first base, the branches of the pine tree next to the porch, cars on the street, the swimming pool when it was up (many
times an over zealous ball player would find himself soaking wet after pursuing a fly ball, and, of course, dog droppings which always made sliding into home interesting.

(12) Whiffle ball had its share of unwanted adults too, especially Mrs. Schultz, my next-door neighbor, who would yell at us for hitting the ball into her yard. To discourage such action, we made it an automatic out if the ball was hit into her yard. It seemed like a fair penalty to us, but Mrs. Schultz insisted that we should be sent to jail. I guess she just did not understand the severity of the penalty we had placed upon ourselves.

(13) But the ultimate reason whiffle ball embodied what childhood was all about must be because whiffle ball was fun. We would spend days playing the game, and hardly ever tire of it. If we did, we would simply change the rules—for instance, batting left-handed or bringing the dog out as the ultimate defender—if she got the runner before he got to the base, he was out which usually was the case. The object was to get two base runners, confusing the dog. She loved it and so did we provided the dog didn't bite anyone. It was fun; it always will be.

(14) We eventually outgrew the ball diamond so many knew as Jeff's backyard and chose to play at the park where ball games did not turn into "Home Run Derby." We were tiring of whiffle ball like we were tiring of childhood. We wanted to expand our world beyond the home, and we did.

(15) We went to separate high schools and hung out with different crowds; some of us graduated from high school. It is rare when I see Bob, Mark, and Chris around and rarer still when I talk to them. The farther we went from the ball diamond, the more distant our friendships became. Dave, Kevin, and I have managed to stay friends. Dave is scheduled to go to Saudi Arabia in a week as a member of the Marine Corps and Kevin recently became the father of a baby girl and really doesn't know what to make of it. And me, I've gone to college.

(16) It's strange looking at the backyard now. We had the sidewalk repaired so first base is gone. The dirt spot that was the pitcher's mound has been filled with grass, as has the sandbox that was once third base. The garden is there but nothing seems to grow there anymore. Only the oak tree and the home plate dirt spot, again the size of a shoebox, remain. Waiting. Waiting for another generation to find out what childhood is all about.