



On an afternoon that deserved to be accompanied by “Autumn,” the third concerto of Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*, my nephew and I threw the football in the front yard of the home he shares with his wife. Then we walked their dog. Afterward, I made the five-mile drive back home. I passed at least 100 houses.

The total number of children I saw outside during our time throwing the football, taking his dog for a walk and

my drive home: zero. On yet another beautiful afternoon, I felt as if I were in a *Twilight Zone* episode where all the children had disappeared.

Where were they?

My childhood was typical of many in the Baby Boom generation, but also typical of the G.I. generation of my parents and of many members of Generation X – those who are



about 30 and older. So I wondered: What’s the difference between us and those born in the last 30 years? Why were we nearly always outside on any given afternoon, on our own? Why aren’t there more children playing in their front yards?

I’ve talked to dozens of people – mostly parents – about my observation. They tell me their childhoods were consistent with my experience of growing up and similar to that annoyingly self-righteous e-mail that blasts around the Internet on a regular basis: The moment we got home from school, we changed clothes and ran outside. We

went in the woods, we walked into town; we messed around on weekends from nine in the morning until suppertime, and our parents often didn’t know where we were. Neighbors looked out for each other, there were no cell phones and there was a sense that life was safe until proven otherwise.



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I also hear from parents that their children do indeed play outside, but where they can be seen and supervised at every moment.

It's easy for columnists and pundits to take shots at parents who are raising the digital generation. Modern parents are often held up as slackers who are too lazy to take their kids outside into the fresh air or too stupid to keep up with the technology that allows children to run circles around them. These are dif-

ferent times, though; young minds tend to grasp new technologies more quickly than parents, and the fresh air is filled with electromagnetic waves making their way into multiple televisions in the average home. Hundreds of channels fill those sets. This is a fearsome tide to turn back, though parents try; it seems as if there are more organized sports and activities for kids in one month than I had in my entire childhood.

So I don't think there's an easy answer, and I don't think parents are particularly at fault for the empty yards in front of so many houses.

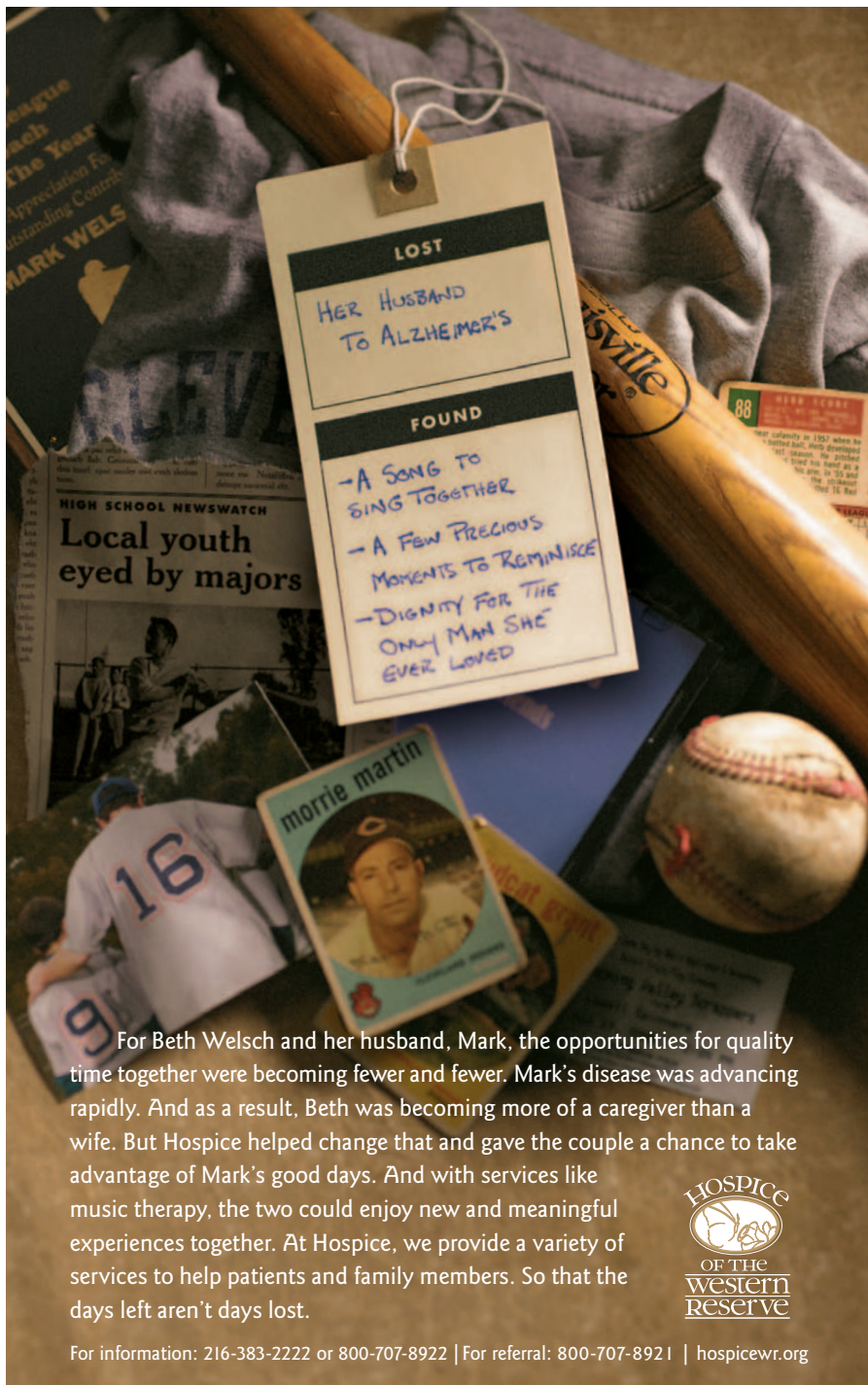
The biggest reason there are empty front yards isn't parents, technology or organized activities – it's fear. I wish I could say the fear isn't real, but tragically, there is much to be wary of. Unlike the invisible but imaginary monsters under our childhood beds, predators potentially lurk on every child's computer. If a congressman can get away with preying on children for years, when his colleagues knew about it, what American child can possibly be thought completely safe from the outside world?

When big things happen – school shootings, abductions, stray bullets in the woods or streets – the culture shifts like a tectonic plate. The map of the social world changes. Kids outdoors become kids indoors.

The answer to why kids aren't outside isn't as simple as turning off a computer, television or iPod, and pushing the child out the door. I wish it were, but if I were a parent today, I'd likely do the same thing as most others. My kid wouldn't hitchhike up and down the East Coast at 17, as I did – as so many of us did. I wouldn't let my kid go walking in the woods alone for hours, as almost all of us did. If I did have a kid today, I'd probably want to take the computer and smash it with a sledgehammer. But I wouldn't. My kid would need to keep up with his peers. As for what that means in this increasingly creepy, misguided and dangerous world, I have no idea.

I only know you can't play catch with a computer, and no video game can match the feeling of being outside on a sunny, Sunday autumn afternoon. And that front yards without children playing look to me like a painting without color. ■

*For more information about the author, visit [www.scottlax.com](http://www.scottlax.com).*



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