

The Curse Of The Ted Williams Rookie Card: 1946

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A young boy comes across a mysterious baseball card in Hartford, Connecticut during the 1946 World Series.
He hopes it will help his favorite team, the Boston Red Sox, win the series.

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Moe Greenberg believed in the Boston Red Sox. At the young age of fifteen, he had not experienced the steady decline of a once-great baseball team. Oh, he knew that his beloved Sox had shrivelled in the shadow of the mighty New York Yankees. This had been the case for all of his life. The other boys on Blue Hills Avenue were all fans of the Bronx Bombers. Their heroes were Babe Ruth and Joe DiMaggio. But Moe wouldn't hear of rooting for the damn Yankees. His religion was the Boston Red Sox, and his savior was a tall slugger by the name of Ted Williams.

Moe lived in the city of Hartford, Connecticut. It had the unique geographical distinction of being halfway between Boston, Massachusetts and New York, New York. Loyalties in this insurance capitol of the world were evenly divided between the Sox and the Yanks. Men and women from each camp were even known to marry out of their faith and produce mixed-allegiance children. Oh, there were certain generalities in Hartford. The Irish tended to favor the Red Sox, while the Italians and Jews tended to be Yankee fans. Moe was a Jew and proud to be one; yet, he stubbornly stuck to his team. Maybe they were a bunch of goy schmucks, but they were Moe's goy schmucks. Any Jewish kid on Blue Hills who had a problem with that could expect a knuckle sandwich with his matzo.

Anyhow, this was the year 1946. The Boston Red Sox were in the World Series! How had this miracle happened? Well, the mighty Yankees were not so mighty during this particular season. They finished third in the American league, behind Detroit and Boston. The Yanks had gone through three managers, while Boston on the other hand was busy winning the pennant under the watchful eye of manager Joe Cronin. Boston was at their peak; the only thing between them and the World Series were those pesky St. Louis Cardinals.

As Moe bicycled down Blue Hills Avenue toward his house in the North End, the sound of Frank Sinatra singing his new hit, "Five Minutes More", reached his ears as it blared from someone's open window. Moe was late for supper, and he found himself wishing that he too had five minutes more. Moe almost ran his bike into a couple of hep cats wearing zoot suits and stepping down the street. The oversized jacket, the wide padded shoulders, the feathered hat and the long pointed shoes of the hep cat was killer-diller to Moe. he couldn't wait until he could get a zoot suit of his own.

Blue Hills Avenue had a busy, hectic pace, like many other post-war American cities. Business was booming and many people were out doing their shopping. Moe passed by a couple of young ladies walking down the street, their dresses extending just past their knees. They both sported a Joan Crawford coif, their long tresses sticking out from under wide hats. Two young men in army uniforms whistled at the girls. They smiled back, but kept walking down Blue Hills.

"Hey, Greenberg," a boy yelled to Moe. "Come over here, Jackson," the pudgy near-sighted boy commanded. It was Charlie Reilly, a neighborhood boy that sometimes played stickball with Moe. Charlie was sitting on the curb in front of Sleusses' Drug Store, holding a paper bag in one hand and drinking out of a tall coke bottle with the other. His black horn-rimmed glasses were so thick that they made his eyes resemble that of an owl.

Moe knew that he shouldn't stop. It was sabbath, and he was going to catch it from Pop if he were late. But Moe could not resist seeing what Charlie Reilly was hiding in that bag. Oh, the poor-sighted boy was definitely a schmo; Charlie was always the last boy picked to play any street game, and he was as square as they came. Still, the small boy often shared his candy with Moe and let him read his comic books. And he was funny; Jack Benny kind of funny.

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Moe jumped from his bike and let it lie on the sidewalk. He pointed a finger at the paper bag. "Hey, Charlie McCarthy, what is in the bag?"

"Some of the splinters I left in Mae West's ass," he replied.

Moe grinned. "No, seriously. What ya got in the bag? The new Almond Joy candy bar? C'mon, it must be somethin' good," he declared.

"I couldn't get my candy bar into this little bag," Charlie said lewdly. "And I might crush my nuts in the process."

Moe rolled his eyes. "Ok, funny man. Make with the bag," he said. Moe raised a fist, and Charlie shrunk back in fear. He quickly and pulled out a handful of cards. "You got baseball cards? Wow, that's killer! What teams you got?" he asked excitedly.

Charlie smiled mysteriously. "Oh, a few Tigers, a few Indians," he said. Then he grinned. "And a Red Sox card."

Moe's eyes lit up. This was rare, killer-diller stuff. Moe was the only Boston fan on Blue Hills Avenue. And Charlie knew it.

"Who ya got?" Moe demanded. "Pesky? Roy Partee? C'mon angel cake, make with the card," he threatened the smaller boy.

"Hey, Moe!" Charlie said, imitating the three stooge's Curly. He then handed Moe the card. Moe stared at the card in his hand. He couldn't believe it. He couldn't have this kind of luck!

Charlie broke the silence. "Well, Mr. Red Sox. What you think of that? A genuine Ted Williams rookie card!" he said with triumph.

Moe shook his head in wonder. He found his voice. "Charlie, this is snazzy. Where you get it?" he asked. Charlie smiled mysteriously once more. Oh, I'm no schmo. I got my sources. Question is, what you willing to trade for it?"

Moe thought quickly. Charlie was no dope. This was going to cost Moe mucho pesos. "How about some Brooklyn Dodgers cards?" he offered. "You are from New York originally, right? I got two Jimmie Fox cards I can trade you."

Charlie laughed. "Those bums? You know rootin-tootin well that Charlie Reilly is a Yankees fan. No, this is gonna cost you, Sonny-Jim," he said.

Moe sighed. He could have just taken the card by force; he was a good head taller than the plump boy, and much tougher. But Moe knew that Pop would find out and make him give it back. Moe decided to try and negotiate.

"Ok, Charlie Chan," he began his pitch. "I can tell you are a man of discriminatin' taste," Moe's voice changed from that of a street tough to the rapid, staccato of a fast-talking salesman. Charlie seemed taken aback by the sudden change.

"You...you know I'm a Yankee fan," Charlie stammered. "What you got that I might want?" he weakly attempted to regain control of the negotiation.

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"Oh, it's not what you want," Moe patted his friend patronizingly on the back. "It's what you need. And what you need is this genuine, certified, Bronxified, Joe DiMaggio card I have here," Moe piped. He reached over to his bicycle and pulled a card from the spokes of his wheel, where several other cards were placed.

"I've got two Joe Dimaggio cards," Moe declared. "I didn't know whether to wipe my ass with them, or to chuck them into the garbage. Lucky for you, Jackson, I got an appreciation for Joltin' Joe. Tell you what...since you are an amigo of mine, I'll trade you one of my Dimaggio cards for that crappy little Ted Williams card," Moe offered.

Charlie hesitated. He had intended to make Moe Greenberg pay through his big, Jewish nose for the card. But Moe had switched everything around. Now Charlie was the desperate one. He loved Joltin' Joe like Moe loved Ted Williams.

"I got to think this over," Charlie insisted. Moe shrugged his shoulders. "Ok, you think about it. "Meantime I'm gonna feed this Yankee card to my dog. He loves Italian," Moe joked.

"Ok,ok...it's a deal," Charlie said with resignation. They switched cards. "Anyway, I can't see why you like the Red Sucks."

Moe became angry. "You're just jealous since your Yankees aren't in the series this year. We beat the Cardinals tonight and we win the Championship!" Moe said happily.

"Not gonna happen," Charlie said with authority. "It's the curse of the Bambino," he said cryptically.

"What does the Bambino got to do with anything?" Moe asked. "Babe Ruth is long gone and retired."

Charlie's eyes glittered with mischief as he related his tale. "It all began in 1920. Boston had been the dominant team at the beginning of the Century. They won three World Series titles behind the solid pitching of Babe Ruth. But then, the owner of the Red Sox sold the Babe to the Yankees in order to finance a Broadway musical. Legend has it, the Bambino cursed the Red Sox as he left Fenway Park for the last time," Charlie informed Moe.

"That is ridiculous," Moe declared. "Who ever heard of such crap?"

"How many World Series titles have the Yankees won since that trade? Dozens! How many titles have the Red Sox won? None! That is not crap, my Hebrew friend. That is the curse of the Bambino! Mark my words, the Red Sox will lose tonight," Charlie predicted.

Moe pocketed his new treasure then sped off for home on his bike. He had no more time for that fool Charlie Reilly. But at least he had been useful for one thing. Moe smiled as he thought of his Ted Williams rookie card.

As Moe ran upstairs to the second floor of his parent's house, he could smell the delicious odor of his mother's potato latkes. Killer-diller with sour cream! But, Moe knew that he was in for trouble as he ran through the front door, into the kitchen.

"Hey Ma, has the game started yet?" Moe asked. The radio was on, but there were no sounds of baseball being played. Instead, there were the sounds of Frank Carle's new hit song, "Rumors are Flying" blaring from the wooden Zenith radio. Mrs. Greenberg, Moe's mother, was placing supper upon the kitchen table. Moe's older sister Tracey was busy setting up the silverware.

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"Morry, where you been?" Ma scolded. "Bad enough to be late for supper, but on the sabbath? Well, go wash up. We gonna light the candles soon," she said in a tired voice. The older lady wiped her prematurely aged face with the corner of her apron.

Tracey clucked her tongue in disapproval. "Oh dear, I hope you haven't been running down Blue Hills Avenue with those hoodlum friends of yours," she admonished Moe, following him to the bathroom door as he attempted to wash up for dinner. "Morry, you need to start thinking about what you want to do after high school. Baseball is ok for kids; what are you gonna be when you get older?" she challenged her younger brother.

"A bum...the biggest," a man's accented voice said from the hallway. A short, near-sighted bald man appeared at the bathroom door, standing next to Tracey. he wore a white cotton shirt and a black tie. It was Pop, Moe and Tracey's father. Despite his short stature, he had an intimidating presence.

"C'mon Pop...I'm washing up," Moe complained. He didn't meet his father's stern, disapproving look; he watched his image from the safety of the bathroom mirror.

Tracey tried to head off the inevitable confrontation. "Pop, did you hear? I got accepted to a teaching college in Boston!" She hugged her father. "Aren't you proud?" she timidly asked.

Pop's words were directed at Tracey; however, they were intended for Moe. "Yes...I am proud. Your older brother Joseph is a doctor. You are gonna be a teacher. And Morry...he is a Red Sox fan," he said with sarcasm.

Moe turned his head in anger. "Always gotta put me down, don't you Pop? Well, I got a headline for you: Moe Greenberg, MVP of the 1950 World Series!" Moe's eyes had angry tears in them.

Pop smiled for the first time that evening. "Moe Greenberg...late for Sabbath and never does his homework. That is headline I expect to see in Hartford Courant."

Ma's gentle voice interrupted the argument. "C'mon you three. Supper is on table. Let us light the candles and thank Lord for our blessings," she said. Ma gently placed her wrinkled hands upon Moe's shoulders as she guided him to the table. The lights were dimmed and the Greenberg family performed the sabbath prayer. There was a red glow that illuminated the tiny kitchen. It combined with the delicious smell of roast chicken and potato latkes to bring a warm feeling to the room.

Moe quickly gulped down his supper. He didn't want to miss the game. Ma's watery eyes noted his eagerness. "Morry...don't eat that way. You gonna get a tummy ache. Here, have some sour cream," she said. She pushed the white china saucer that contained the pungent topping toward her young son. He shook his head, wiping his mouth with the edge of his sleeve. Moe started to push his chair away from the table.

"Where you think you go, Morry?" his father demanded. Moe glanced nervously at his father. "I gotta turn the radio channel. It's Game Seven of the World Series, Pop. I gotta hear it," he implored his father.

Pop shook his head. "You do your homework? No? Well then, no radio for you," he declared.

Moe's voice was urgent. "But Pop...it's Friday! No school until Monday. I got all weekend to do my homework," he begged.

"Please Pop, let Morry listen to the game," Tracey's voice implored her father. "You know how Morry loves his Red Sox! Please?" she touched her father's sleeve gently.

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Pop was firm. "You gotta learn...you gotta learn what is important," he insisted.

Ma's red eyes met those of her husband's. "Please, Papa..just this once," her voice was soulful and haunting.

Pop closed his eyes. He was silent for what seemed like hours. Finally, he nodded his head. "Ok., Morry. But if you don't do homework by Sunday..." he said, shaking his small fist at his son.

Like a bolt of lightning, Moe shot to the radio. He switched on the dial. The sound of announcer mel Allen filled the living room. I t was an exciting game. St. Louis had won the previous game by one run, and this seventh game would decide who were to be the baseball champions of 1946.

Moe pulled his Ted Williams card from his pocket., stroking it with care. He glance down at it as he listened to the sound of the game. he suddenly frowned. something was wrong.

"What is wrong, Morry?" Tracey asked. "What you got there?" She sat down in a chair next to her brother. ma wondered back into the room, taking a seat on the forest green sofa. Pop entered the room last, standing with his arms crossed and looking defiant.

"I got this card from Charlie Reilly," Moe informed them. "It's a genuine Ted Williams rookie card. But it ain't perfect. See?" he indicated the back of the card. There is a brown spot on the back. I'll bet that schmo Reilly was eating an Almond Joy candy bar, and stained it," he declared.

"Don't be too hard on Charlie, Morry," Ma told her son. "You love that Ted Williams. Appreciate what you got," she said.

"Yeah...I guess," Moe agreed. He returned his attention to the game. "Quiet, the game is close," he informed his family.

It was the eighth inning. The score was tied, 3-3. Then, the Cardinal's Eno Slaughter got a single. There was still hope for the sox. The next two Cardinal batters got out. Mel allen's voice filled the living room.

"Enos Slaughter is on base with two away. Henry Walker is at bat. Klinger on the mound. He takes the stretch. Here's the pitch. There goes Slaughter. The ball is swung on, there's a line-drive going into left center field. It's in there for a base hit. Culberson fumbles the ball and Slaughter charges around second, heads for third. Pesky goes into short left field to take the relay from Culberson. AND HERE COMES ENOS SLAUGHTER ROUNDING THIRD! HE'S GOING TO TRY FOR HOME! HERE! HERE COMES THE THROW AND IT'S NOT ON TIME! SLAUGHTER SCORES!

Moe shook his head in disbelief. It couldn't be. It just couldn't be. "There's one more inning left. They're gonna win it...they gotta!" Moe said and sat in silent prayer during the ninth inning, his sweaty hands clasping the card as he willed the Red Sox to pull it out.

But they didn't. The inning ended; the St. Louis Cardinals had won the World Series. Moe turned off the radio. His head hung low as the bitter tears fell upon his cheeks. Moe suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Pop! He looked up at his father and was surprised to see him smiling sadly.

"It is ok, Morry," he said. "I think your Red Sox our like us Jews. We never win, but we keep trying anyway. And we not let anyone keep us down," he said. He tried to rub his son's shoulders. But Moe suddenly shot to his feet and ran out of the room. The family could hear him saying, "They shoulda won..." Tracey tried to follow him, but Pop stopped her. "He gotta learn on his own," he remarked.

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Moe ran to his bedroom. He grabbed his Red Sox pictures and ripped them up. He angrily pulled down the news clippings that he had taped to his wall. He looked around the room, desperate for something to vent his frustrations upon. He suddenly remembered the card. He pulled it from his pocket and stared at it with hate and disappointment.

"You didn't do nothing, Ted," he accused the card. "You didn't do nothing to win..." Moe made a motion as if to tear the card apart. But he found he couldn't do it. Moe knew that the real Ted Williams had played injured; the loss wasn't his fault. Still, Moe slowly walked over to the second-floor window and stared out into the October dusk. He paused for only a moment. Then, with all of his might, Moe flung the card out of the open window, into the night air. He watched it for only a brief second. Then Moe Greenberg turned his back on both Ted Williams and the Boston Red Sox.

The card floated in the warm breeze, flying in tandem with the yellow-orange leaves that also hung in the wind. It glided, progressed, ebbed, whirled, and then drifted down the empty streets of Blue Hills Avenue before it vanished into the air.

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