House of Cards

In 1962, on Union Street, between Sutter and Blake, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, Mickey Mantle wasn't more valuable than Minnie Minoso or Marvelous Marv. And Sandy Koufax wasn't worth more than Sandy Amoros.

I'm talking about baseball cards. From Opening Day through the World Series, the twelve year old kids in our neighborhood used them as currency. With the exception of Brian Silver, whose father owned a furniture store, we couldn't afford to buy many new cards. So we eagerly accepted hand-me-downs from our older brothers. We took long walks along Pitkin Avenue, the shopping street, eyes peeled on the pavement, in search of a "double" that a rich kid might discard, as he stuffed a square pink slab of gum in his mouth and searched for the players he didn't yet "have" to complete his set. And on occasion, in our quest for cards, we crossed the line. I kept Mr. Lillian busy, bargaining for a Spaldeen (until he growled "there's no such thing as a ten cent ball"), while Louis Goz, a garbage man's son, slid three packs into the pocket of his dungaree jacket and slipped out the door of the candy store.

We were ardent fans. At least one Sunday a month, I sat with my dad in the right field bleachers, with a knot of Yankee haters, sipping soda from his thermos and hoping against hope (except for 1959!) that the Chicago White Sox of Nellie Fox, Luis Aparicio, Jungle Jim Rivera, and Hoyt Wilhelm might prevail. But despite our partisanship, and our favorite players, it didn't matter to me or my buddies what year a card was issued, whether it was oversized (1952) or showed the player inside a television set (1956). We didn't even care all that much whether we acquired a star, like Stan the Man, or a scrub, like Sibbi Sisti. We used 'em all, each with a value of one, throwing them into the pot in the poker game played on the stone porch of the eight-family house in which Howie Birnbaum lived, or flipping them (if I match your seven heads and three tails I take all your cards), or wristing them from the curb to get closest to my apartment building.

That summer everything changed. Determined to move out and up, as Brownsville got blacker, my dad, a salesman at Cornell Shoes in downtown Brooklyn, and my mom, a legal secretary, scraped up the money to buy a two family house on East 31st Street and Avenue M, with their friends Morris and Pauline Klapowitz. When I went with them to check out my new middle-class surroundings in Flatlands, I learned that my soon-to-be P.S. 193...
classmates (and stick-ball teammates), Randy Model, Eric Nadel, and David Post, used only baseball cards from the current year. Except for Eric, who became the voice of the Texas Rangers, they didn't know much about Eddie Joost, Ned Garver, and Stan Lopata. And they didn't keep anything, not even the 1957 Warren Spahn or the 1961 Roger Maris.

As moving day approached, I looked through my shoeboxes, filled with thousands of cards, bundled together by team and year. I announced to everyone, even the Tapscott Street bully, Bernard "Smellman" Gelman, that on August 20, I would throw them out the window of our apartment ("third floor front," my mother told people, proudly and defensively). On the appointed day, about three dozen kids gathered, in eager anticipation of a baseball windfall. "The 1956 Dodgers," I yelled, and sent the team on its way. As the crowd pushed and shoved to grab the cards floating over their heads, I screamed "The 1961 Yankees," throwing the Bronx Bombers in the other direction. The pandemonium lasted about an hour. Never before had I felt so powerful.

Little did I know, of course, that within a few years twelve-year-olds would take their pristine cards out of circulation minutes after they purchased them and place them in plastic. Or that the cards I had discarded would fetch more money than all the furniture we took to our new house.

I entered a new world in 1963, the year of my bar mitzvah and the assassination of John F. Kennedy. It was, for a time, a more prosperous world, and to this very day, is more present-minded. But I'm not at all sure it was better. Play ball!