

*Joe DiMaggio*

# *Foe*

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# *DiMaggio*

The Long Vigil

Jerome Charyn

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It is as if DiMaggio expects her to understand, with of course never a word being said, that he has not arrived at his eminence in Toots Shor's along with Hemingway and one or two select sports writers and gamblers because he is dumb or gifted or lucky but because he had an art that demanded huge concentration, and the consistent courage over the years to face into thousands of fast balls any of which could kill or cripple him if he were struck in the head.

—NORMAN MAILER, *Marilyn*

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## *Preface*

How can I ever explain the old Yankee Stadium to anyone who hasn't grown up in the Bronx? It was the one ornament we had in a borough that was nothing but a series of hinterlands. We had our exotica, such as a botanical garden and a zoo that tried (and failed) to replicate the African plains; a cemetery where Herman Melville lies; a cottage where Edgar Allan Poe might have lived; our own movie palace, the Paradise, and a few deluxe ice cream parlors; even a medley of Art Deco apartment houses on the Grand Concourse, a boulevard meant to look like the Champs-Élysées, but was only one more mirage that led nowhere, though it did skirt Yankee Stadium. And if you were lucky enough to sneak onto the roof of a building near the Concourse and 161st Street, you could gaze right into that delicious concrete bowl down the hill and catch a wide swath of green that looked like a methodical forest. During a night game (much rarer then), that deep bowl burnt with a yellow haze that belonged to the Bronx. It was our own impossible season

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that finished long before midnight, but seemed to linger like some endless Halloween.

Yet that was only a meager portion of its magic. The concrete bowl housed a phantom we seldom saw. His name was DiMaggio. He didn't live with the other Yankee players at *our* hotel, the Concourse Plaza, where the daughters of Bronx millionaires were married. DiMaggio lived downtown, across the Harlem River, at a Manhattan hotel. Poor as we were in '46 and '47, we still had enough gelt to get through the turnstile at Yankee Stadium and watch the phantom play. He never signed autographs, never smiled, never clowned, like outfielders on the Senators or the Indians, who would do elaborate pantomimes for us while one of their own pitchers was warming up. He didn't pretend to notice us, or fake an intimacy with the fans. He was brutal in his devotion to the game. He didn't fidget, didn't slap his glove. There was no off-time for Joltin' Joe. Even if we were behind by seven runs, and a new relief pitcher trotted in from the Yankee bullpen, he didn't waver once. He would watch that pitcher's windup, study his nervous tics, as if every gesture on the field were part of some mysterious baseball map that only he could master. He knocked the scoreboard out of our heads, and the batting averages we knew by heart. We hadn't come to preside over the fall of the Red Sox and the Browns, or to see DiMaggio hit a home run. We weren't acolytes. We were students of the game, and by studying DiMaggio as he stood there in center field, alert and alone, with his wounded heel, we came a little closer to understanding the sway that baseball had over us. It wasn't statistics or the panoply of pennant flags. It was the power to hypnotize, to fill us with a fever. This strange man showed us how serious the game was—for DiMaggio, and for ourselves, it was a matter of life and death.

The Yankee Clipper reached beyond baseball into the American psyche. He was our suffering hero, gloriously alone in center field,

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when play itself was a kind of sacrifice. He arrived like a lightning bolt in the middle of the Great Depression and seemed to soothe us all.

So celebrated was he during his rookie season—1936—that even President Roosevelt had come to watch him play. It was the second game of the World Series against the New York Giants; the Bronx Bombers were ahead 18–4 in the ninth inning. DiMaggio, running like a devil, made an impossible behind-the-shoulder catch in the deepest hinterland of the Polo Grounds. At that very moment FDR appeared. He was riding in his open limousine toward the gates in center field. And he waved to Joe with the brim of his hat. All of America could have been in the stands, as the crowd acknowledged that salute with what one sports writer called “a final, rippling cheer.”

And now we have a new Yankee Stadium that looms right across the street from the old one, on the site of a former playground and park. You can find images of Alex Rodriguez & Co. along its outer wall. But the stadium’s inner world is no longer visible from the Grand Concourse. The old stadium once sat beside it like a mournful ghost. Much of its carcass has been picked clean. But you can still catch a whiff of Joltin’ Joe while it’s there. You can still recall the Jolter’s leaps. That carcass might even conjure up a wild era when players strove without ever really getting rich, when no one, not even DiMaggio, ever made millions wearing a Yankee uniform.

But one thing continues to plague us about our memory of the Jolter. Why did his intensity and terrifying heat in center field diminish away from the field and leave him with so little sense of purpose? Why was there such a haunting dissonance between the man and his image, or did *we* impose an image upon him that was utterly removed from the man? He seemed to fall into the land of trivia once he left the Yankees. Why couldn’t his prowess as a player have kept him in good stead? Was there something corrosive

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for DiMaggio about the very nature of celebrity? He was one of the most idolized men in America, yet he'd become his own haunted house. While still a Yankee, beloved by half the nation, he would sit like some magnificent hermit at Toots Shor's, the Manhattan watering hole of sports stars and other nabobs. DiMaggio was the prince of Table One. No one could approach him without Toots' approval. He sat with Jackie Gleason or Frank Sinatra and Ernest Hemingway, and he never said a word all night. Did *their* celebrity shield him? Was he safe around Sinatra and "Hem"? Or was it an omen of things to come? A shyness that would cripple him once he didn't have the security of his cavern in center field? Why did he become so dysfunctional and end his days in a golden ghetto, frightened of his own fame yet needing to guard it with a stubborn, maddening will? He lived long enough to become the grand old man of baseball who could share his wisdom with his fans and younger players. What was there about the Yankee Clipper's inner torment that never allowed him to do so? Why did he disappear inside himself, like a living ghost?

## *Chronology*

- 1914 Joe DiMaggio is born (November 25) in Martinez, California, a fishing village twenty-five miles north of San Francisco, the eighth child of Giuseppe and Rosalie Mercurio DiMaggio, immigrants from Isola della Femmine, a bleak island off the coast of Palermo, where Crusaders supposedly abandoned their unfaithful wives.
- 1915 The DiMaggios move to San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood.
- 1917 Dom DiMaggio, Joe's youngest brother, is born (February 12). Joe will have a lifelong rivalry with Dom, who is much cleverer outside the realm of baseball. He will have less of a rivalry with his brother Vince (born in 1912), an outfielder in the National League.
- 1918 Ted Williams is born (August 20) in San Diego, California, with practically a bat in his cradle; he will begin to haunt local sandlots long before he is ten.
- 1926 Marilyn Monroe is born (June 1) under the name Norma Jeane Mortensen in Los Angeles, the daughter of Gladys

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Monroe Mortensen Baker—a woman with a myriad of husbands, lovers, and names—and a father who isn't really known but might have been Martin Edward Mortensen, a meterman whom Gladys left after four months of marriage. Gladys, who is quite unstable, will hand her two-week-old baby over to the Bolanders, a couple who care for foster children. For most of her life Marilyn will fantasize that Clark Gable was her real father.

- 1931 Mickey Mantle is born (August 13) in a mining town, Spavinaw, Oklahoma. His father, Mutt Mantle, will raise him to be a baseball player almost from birth.
- 1933 A high school dropout who doesn't want to be a fisherman like his dad, Joe leaps right from a dinky semipro club to the San Francisco Seals of the Pacific Coast League and breaks a league record by hitting safely in sixty-one consecutive games.
- 1936 Joe joins the Yankees and becomes perhaps the most heralded rookie who ever played in the big leagues; with Joe ensconced in center field, the Bombers will win their first pennant and World Series in four years. Right from the start he is considered the premier outfielder in the American League.
- 1939 After two years of courtship, Joe marries a beautiful blond showgirl from Minnesota, Dorothy Arnold, in San Francisco (November 10).
- 1941 Joe becomes the most celebrated athlete in America as he hits safely in fifty-six consecutive games; his son, Joe DiMaggio, Jr., is born (October 23) and is almost as celebrated as Joe himself.
- 1942 Joe, the hero of 1941, is plagued by all sorts of doubt as other baseball heroes have gone off to war; Dorothy prepares to file for divorce.
- 1943 Joe reluctantly enlists in the Army Air Force.
- 1946 Joe returns to baseball without a wife. He begins to be plagued by injuries. For the first time in the big leagues he will bat under .300.

## *Chronology*

- 1949 Casey Stengel, Joe's nemesis, is named manager of the New York Yankees.
- 1951 Mickey Mantle arrives at the Yankee camp with as much attention from fans and the press as Joe had first received in 1936. But Mantle will not have a great rookie season. In December, after a mediocre season of his own, Joe announces his retirement from baseball.
- 1952 Joe meets Marilyn Monroe; the nation is immediately drawn to this marvelous couple, even though there's a certain ambiguity about their romance. Joe wants to marry her; Marilyn is reluctant.
- 1954 Joe and Marilyn are married in San Francisco (January 14) while she is under suspension at Twentieth Century-Fox. They leave for a honeymoon in Japan. In October, Marilyn files for divorce.
- 1962 Joe remains obsessed with Marilyn, who had married and divorced playwright Arthur Miller; her own career seems on the decline. Marilyn agrees to marry Joe again but dies of an overdose of barbiturates during the evening of August 4-5.
- 1999 Joe DiMaggio dies in Hollywood, Florida (March 8), after having undergone surgery for lung cancer and contracting pneumonia and a lung infection. While he lay dying there was "a national vigil," according to the *New York Times*.

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*Joe DiMaggio*

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## *Prologue*

### *Pinocchio in Pinstripes*

#### I.

He was the nonpareil, missed from the moment he retired in 1951. “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?” asked Paul Simon in 1967. “A nation turns its lonely eyes to you.” Thus there was a lament for DiMaggio long before he died, in 1999. And when he lay ill in a hospital during the last days of his life, the flurry of reports about his condition could have been about a pontiff or a president, not a baseball player who toiled in the outfield at Yankee Stadium for thirteen years. DiMaggio seemed to override baseball and sports itself. He was the lonely practitioner of some lost American art—America’s one and only prince, who happened to have been a baseball player.

Babe Ruth was loved; Ty Cobb was reviled. Joe DiMaggio was revered, looked upon with an almost religious awe. He was the first saint of baseball when baseball itself was a religion, an icon of American life, “the binding national myth,” according to David Halberstam in *Summer of ’49*; and even as reverberations began to