The record book will tell you that Roberto Clemente collected 3,000 hits during his major-league career. It will say that he came to bat 9,454 times, that he drove in 1,305 runs, and played 2,433 games over an eighteen-year span.

But it won’t tell you about Carolina, Puerto Rico, and the old square. And the narrow, twisting streets, and the roots that produced him. It won’t tell you about the Julio Coronado School and a remarkable woman named Maria Isabella Casaresi whom he called Teacher until the day he died and who helped to shape his life in times of despair and depression. It won’t tell you about a man named Pedro Zarrilla, who found him on a country softball team and put him in the uniform of the Santurce club and who nursed him from a promising young athlete to a major-league superstar.

And most of all, those cold numbers won’t begin to delineate the man Roberto Clemente was. To even begin to understand what this magnificent athlete was all about, you have to work backward. The search begins at the site of its ending.

The car moves easily through the predawn streets of San Juan. It turns down a bumpy secondary road and moves past small shantytowns. Then there is another turn, onto hard-packed dirt and sand, and although the light has not yet quite begun to break, you can sense the nearness of the ocean. You can hear its waves, pounding harshly against the jagged rocks. You can smell its saltiness. The car noses to a stop, and the driver says. "From here you must walk." The place is called Punta Maldonado.

"This is the nearest place," the driver tells me. "This is where they came by the thousands on that New Years eve and New Years day. Out there," he says, gesturing with his right hand. "Out there, perhaps a mile and a half from where we stand. That's where we think the plane went down."
The final hours of Roberto Clemente were like this. Just a month or so before, he had agreed to take a junior-league baseball team to Nicaragua and manage it in an all-star game in Managua. He had met people and made friends there. He was not a man who made friends casually. He had always said that the people you wanted to give your friendship to were the people to whom you had to be willing to give something -- no matter what the price.

Just two weeks after he returned from that trip, Managua, Nicaragua, exploded into flames. The earth trembled, and people died. It was the worst earthquake anywhere in the hemisphere in a long time.

Back in Puerto Rico, a television personality named Luis Vigereaux heard the news and was moved to try to help the victims. He needed someone to whom the people would listen, someone who could say what had to be said and get the work done that had to be done and help the people who had to be helped.

I knew. Luis Vigereaux said, "that Roberto was such a person perhaps the only such person who would be willing to help.

And so the mercy project, which would eventually claim Roberto's life, began. He appeared on television, but he needed a staging area. The city agreed to give him Sixto Escobar Stadium.

'Bring what you can," he told the people ~Bring medicine ... bring clothes ... bring food... bring shoes... bring yourself to help us load We need so much. Whatever you bring, we will use.

And the people of San Juan came. They walked through the heat and they drove old cars and battered little trucks, and the mound of supplies grew and grew. Within two days the first mercy planes left for Nicaragua.

Meanwhile, a ship had been chartered and loaded. And as it prepared to steam away, unhappy stories began to drift back from Nicaragua. Not all the supplies that had been flown in, it was rumored, were getting through. Puerto Ricans, who had flown the planes, had no passports, and Nicaragua was in a state of panic.
"We have people there who must be protected. Black-market types' must not be allowed to get their hands on these supplies," Clemente told Luis Vigereaux. "Someone must make sure -- particularly before the ship gets there. I'm going on the next plane."

The plane they had rented was an old DC-7. It was scheduled to take off at 4 pm on December 31, 1972. Long before takeoff time, it was apparent that the plane needed more work. It had even taxied onto the runway and then turned back. The trouble, a mechanic who was at the airstrip that day conjectured, "had to do with both port engines. We worked on them most of the afternoon."

The departure time was delayed an hour, and then two, and then three at 9 P.M., even as the first stirrings of the annual New Year's eve celebration were beginning in downtown San Juan, the DC-7 taxied onto the runway, received clearance, rumbled down the narrow concrete strip, and pulled away from the earth. It headed out over the Atlantic and banked toward Nicaragua, and its tiny lights disappeared on the horizon.

Just ninety seconds later, the tower at San Juan International Airport received this message from the DC-7 pilot, "We are coming back around."

Just that.

Nothing more.

And then there was a great silence.

"It was almost midnight," recalls Rudy Hernandez, a former teammate of Roberto's, "We were having this party in my restaurant. Somebody turned on the radio, and the announcer was saying that Roberto's plane was feared missing. And then, because my place is on the beach, we saw these giant floodlights crisscrossing the waves, and we heard the sound of the helicopters and the little search planes."

Drawn by a common sadness, the people of San Juan began to make their way toward the beach, toward Punta Maldonado. A cold rain had begun to fall. It washed their faces and blended with the tears.
They came by the thousands, and they watched for three days. Towering waves boiled up and made the search virtually impossible. The U.S. Navy sent a team of expert divers into the area, but the battering of the waves defeated them too. Midway through the week, the pilot’s body was found in the swift-moving currents to the north. On Saturday, bits of the cockpit were sighted.

And then -- nothing else.

Rudy Hernandez said, "I have never seen a time or a sadness like that. The streets were empty, the radios silent, except for the constant bulletins about Roberto. Traffic? Forget it. All of us cried. All of us who knew him, and even those who didn't, wept that week. There will never be another like Roberto."

Who was he... I mean really?

He was born in Carolina, Puerto Rico. Today the town has about 125,000 people, but when Roberto was born there in 1934, it was roughly one-sixth its current size.

Maria Isabella Casares is a schoolteacher. She has taught the children of Carolina for thirty years. Most of her teaching has been done in tenth-grade history classes. Carolina is her home, and its children are her children. And among all of those whom she calls her own (who are all the children she taught), Roberto Clemente was something even more special to her.

"His father was an overseer on a sugar plantation. He did not make much money, she explained in an empty classroom at Julio Coronado School. "But then, there are no rich children here. There never have been. Roberto was typical of them. I had known him when he was a small boy because my father had run a grocery store in Carolina and Roberto's parents used to shop there."

There is this thing that you have to know about Maria Isabella Casares before we hear more from her. What you have to know is that she is the model of what a teacher should be. Between her and her students even now, as back when Roberto attended her school, there is this common
bond of mutual respect. Earlier in the day, I had watched her teach a class in the history of the Abolition Movement in Puerto Rico. I don't speak much Spanish, but even to me it was clear that this is how a class should be, this is the kind of person who should teach, and these are the kinds of students such a teacher will produce.

With this as a background, what she has to say about Roberto Clemente carries much more impact.

"Each year," she said, "I let my students choose the seats they want to sit in. I remember the first time I saw Roberto. He was a very shy boy, and he went straight to the back of the room and chose the very last seat. Most of the time he would sit with his eyes down. He was an average student. But there was something very special about him. We would talk after class for hours. He wanted to be an engineer, you know, and perhaps he could have been. But then he began to play softball, and one day he came to me and said, 'Teacher, I have a problem.'

"He told me that Pedro Zarrilla, who was one of our most prominent baseball people, had seen him play and that Pedro wanted him to sign a professional contract with the Santurce Crabbers. He asked me what he should do

"I have thought about that conversation many times. I believe Roberto could have been almost anything, but God gave him a gift that few have, and he chose to use that gift. I remember that on that day I told him, 'This is your chance, Roberto. We are poor people in this town. This is your chance to do something. But if in your heart you prefer not to try, then, Roberto, that will be your problem -- and your decision.'"

There was, and there always remained a closeness between this boy-soon-to-be-a-man and his favorite teacher.

"Once, a few years ago, I was sick with a very bad back. Roberto, not knowing this, had driven over from Rio Piedras, where his house was, to see me, Mrs. Casares recalled.

"Where is the teacher?" Roberto asked Mrs. Casares's stepdaughter that
afternoon.

"Teacher is sick, Roberto. She is in bed."

"Teacher," Roberto said, pounding on the bedroom door, "get up and put on your clothes. We are going to the doctor whether you want to or not."

"I got dressed," Mrs. Casares told me, "and he picked me up like a baby and carried me in his arms to the car. He came every day for fifteen days, and most days he had to carry me. But I went to the doctor, and he treated me. Afterward, I said to the doctor that I wanted to pay the bill.

"Mrs. Casares." he told me. "Please don't start with that Clemente or he will kill me. He has paid all your bills, and don't you dare tell him I have told you."

Well, Roberto was like that. We had been so close. You know, I think I was there the day he met Vera, the girl he later married. She was one of my students too. I was working part-time in the pharmacy, and he was already a baseball player by then, and one day Vera came into the store.

"Teacher," Roberto asked me, "who is that girl?"

"That's one of my students," I told him, "Now, don't you dare bother her. Go out and get someone to introduce you. Behave yourself."

He was so proper, you know. That's just what he did, and that's how he met her, and they were married here in Carolina in the big church on the square.

On the night Roberto Clemente's plane disappeared, Mrs. Casares was at home, and a delivery boy from the pharmacy stopped by and told her to turn on the radio and sit down. "I think something has happened to someone who is very close to you, Teacher, and I want to be here in case you need help."

Maria Isabella Casares heard the news. She is a brave woman, and months
later, standing in front of the empty crypt in the cemetery at Carolina where Roberto Clemente was to have been buried, she said, "He was like a son to me. This is why I want to tell you about him. This is why you must make people -- particularly our people, our Puerto Rican children -- understand what he was. He was like my son, and he is all our sons in a way. We must make sure that the children never forget how beautiful a man he was."

The next person to touch Roberto Clemente was Pedro Zarrilla, who owned the Santurce club. He was the man who discovered Clemente on the country softball team, and he was the man who signed him for a four hundred-dollar bonus.

"He was a skinny kid," Pedro Zarrilla recalls, "but even then he had those large, powerful, hands, which we all noticed right away.

He joined us, and he was nervous. But I watched him, and I said to myself, 'This kid can throw, and this kid can run, and this kid can hit. We will be patient with him 'The season had been through several games before I finally sent him in to play."

Luis Olmo remembers that game. Luis Olmo had been a major-league outfielder with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He had been a splendid ballplayer Today he is in the insurance business in San Juan. He sat in his office and recalled very well that first moment when Roberto Clemente stepped up to bat.

"I was managing the other team. They had a man on base, and this skinny kid comes out. Well, we had never seen him, so we didn't really know how to pitch to him. I decided to throw him a few bad balls and see if he'd bite

"He hit the first pitch. It was an outside fastball and he never should have been able to reach it. But he hit it down the line for a double. He was the best bad-ball hitter I have ever seen, and if you ask major-league pitchers who are pitching today, they will tell you the same thing. After a while, it got so that I just told my pitchers to throw the ball down the middle because he was going to hit it no matter where they put it, and at least if he decided not to swing, we'd have a strike on him."
"I played in the big leagues. I know what I am saying. He was the greatest we ever had, maybe one of the greatest anyone ever had. Why did he have to die?"

Once Pedro Zarrilla turned him loose, there was no stopping Roberto Clemente. As Clemente's confidence grew, he began to get better and better. He was the one the crowds came to see out at Sixto Escobar Stadium.

"You know, when Clemente was in the line up," Pedro Zarrilla says, "there was always this undercurrent of excitement in the ball park. You knew that if he was coming to bat he would do something spectacular. You knew that if he was on first base, he was going to try to get to second base. You knew that if he was playing right field and there was a man on third base, then that man on third base already knew what a lot of men on third base in the majors were going to find out -- you don't try to get home against Roberto Clemente's arm."

Soon the major-league scouts began to make their moves, and in 1955 Roberto Clemente came to the Pittsburgh Pirates. He was the finest prospect the club had had in a long, long time. But the Pirates of those days were spectacular losers, and even Roberto Clemente couldn't turn them around overnight.

"I will never forget how fast he became a superstar in this town," says Bob Friend, who became a great Pirate pitcher. "Later he would have troubles because he was either hurt or thought he was hurt, and some people would say that he was loafing. But I know he gave it his best shot, and he helped make us winners.

The first winning year was 1960, when the Pirates won the pennant and went on to beat the Yankees in the seventh game of the World Series. Whitey Ford, who pitched against him twice in that Series, recalls that Roberto actually made himself look bad on an outside pitch to encourage Whitey to come back with it. "I did," Ford recalls. "And he unloaded. Another thing I remember is the way he ran out a routine ground ball in the last game, and when we were a little slow covering, he beat it out. It was something most people forget, but it made the Pirates' victory
The season was over. Roberto Clemente had hit safely in every World Series game. He had batted over 300. He had been a super star. But when they announced the Most Valuable Player Award voting, Roberto had finished a distant third.

"I really don't think he resented the fact that he didn't win it." Bob Friend says. "What hurt -- and in this he was right -- was how few votes he got. He felt that he simply wasn't being accepted. He brooded about that a lot. I think his attitude became one of 'well, I'm going to show them from now on so that they will never forget.'

"And you know, he sure did."

Roberto Clemente went home and married Vera. He felt less alone. Now he could go on and prove what it was he had to prove. And he was determined to prove it.

His moment finally came. It took eleven years for the Pirates to win a World Series berth again, and when they did in 1971, it was Roberto Clemente who led the way. I will never forget him as he was during that 1971 Series with the Orioles, a Series that the Pirates figured to lose and in which they, in fact, dropped the first two games down in Baltimore.

When they got back to Pittsburgh for the middle slice of the tournament, Roberto Clemente went to work and led his team. He was a superstar during the five games that followed. He was the big man in the Series. He was the MVP. He was everything he had ever dreamed of being on a ball field.

Most important of all, the entire country saw him do it on network television, and never again -- even though nobody knew it would end so tragically soon -- was anyone ever to doubt his ability.

The following year, Clemente ended the season by collecting his three thousandth hit. Only ten other men had ever done that in the entire history of baseball.
"When I think of Roberto now," says Willie Stargell, his closest friend on the Pirates, "I think of the kind of man he was. There was nothing phony about him. He had his own ideas about how life should be lived, and if you didn't see it that way then he let you know in so many ways, without words, that it was best you each go your separate ways.

"He was a man who chose his friends carefully. His was a friendship worth having. I didn't think many people took the time and the trouble to try to understand him, and I'll admit it wasn't easy. But he was worth it.

"The way he died, you know, I mean on that plane carrying supplies to Nicaraguans who'd been dying in that earthquake, well, I wasn't surprised he'd go out and do some thing like that. I wasn't surprised he'd go. I just never thought what happened could happen to him.

"But I know this. He lived a full life. And if he knew at that moment what the Lord had decided, well, I really believe he would have said, 'I'm ready.'"

He was thirty-eight years old when he died. He touched the heart of Puerto Rico in a way that few people ever could. He touched a lot of other hearts too. He touched hearts that beat inside people of all colors of skin.