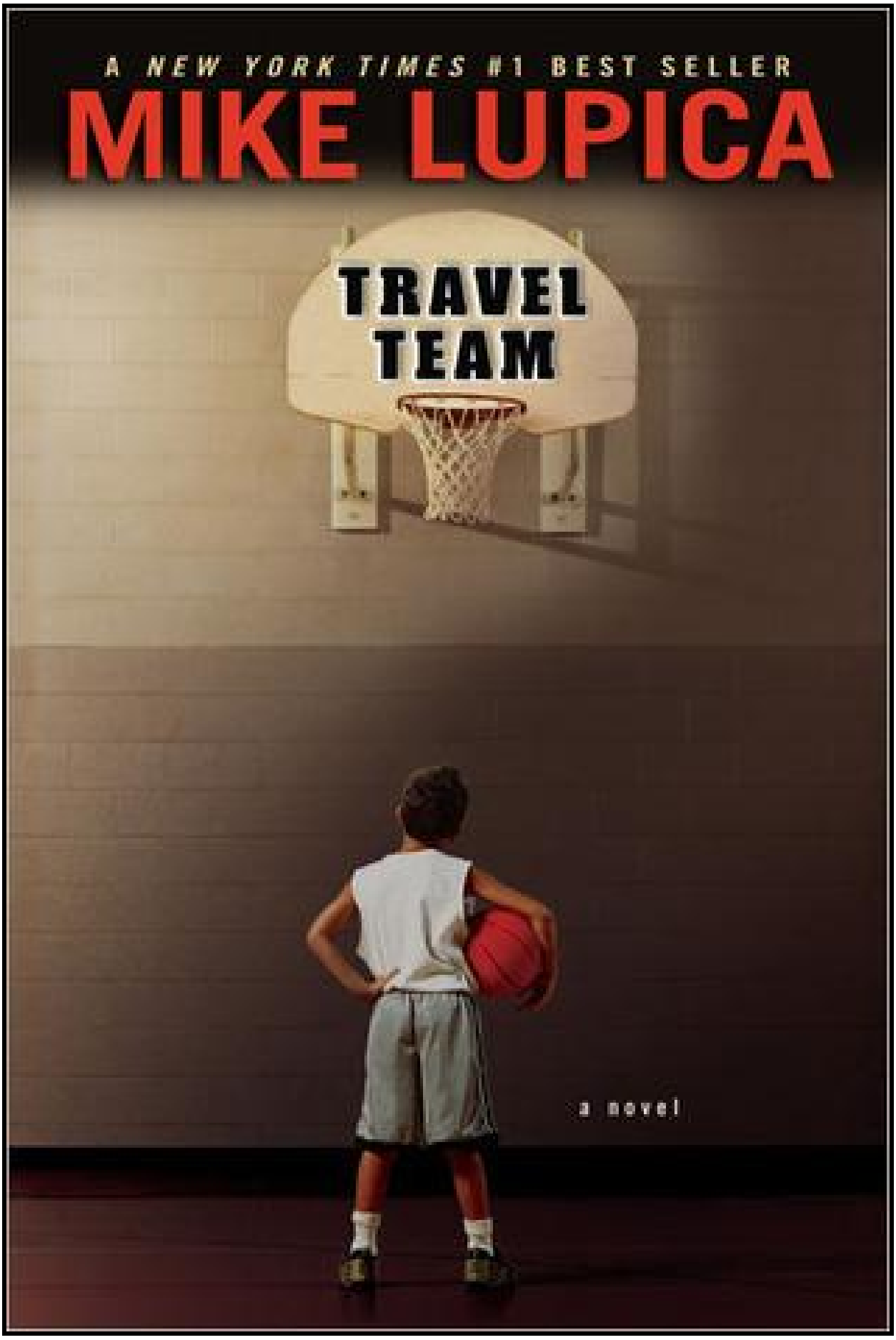
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MIKE LUPICA
TRAVEL TEAM
a novel

TRAVEL TEAM

by Mike Lupica

CHAPTER 1

HE KNEW HE WAS SMALL.

He just didn't think he was small.

Big difference.

Danny had known his whole life how small he was compared to everybody in his grade, from the first grade on. How he had been put in the front row, front and center, of every class picture taken. Been in the front of every line marching into every school assembly, first one through the door. Sat in the front of every classroom. Hey, little man. Hey, little guy. He was used to it by now. They'd been studying DNA in science lately; being small was in his DNA. He'd show up for soccer, or Little League baseball tryouts, or basketball, when he'd first started going to basketball tryouts at the Y, and there'd always be one of those clipboard dads who didn't know him, or his mom. Or his dad.

Asking him: "Are you sure you're with the right group, little guy?"

Meaning the right age group.

It happened the first time when he was eight, back when he still had to put the ball up on his shoulder and give it a heave just to get it up to a ten-foot rim. When he'd already taught himself how to lean into the bigger kid guarding him, just because there was always a bigger kid guarding him, and then step back so he could get his dopey shot off.

This was way back before he'd even tried any fancy stuff, including the crossover.

He just told the clipboard dad that he was eight, that he was little, that this was his right group, and could he have his number, please? When he told his mom about it later, she just smiled and said, "You know what you should hear when people start talking about your size? Blah blah blah."

He smiled back at her and said that he was pretty sure he would be able to remember that.

"How did you play?" she said that day, when she couldn't wait any longer for him to tell.

"I did okay."

"I have a feeling you did more than that," she said, hugging him to her. "My streak of light."

Sometimes she'd tell him how small his dad had been when he was Danny's age.

Sometimes not.

But here was the deal, when he added it all up: His height had always been much more of a stinking issue for other people, including his mom, than it was for him.

He tried not to sweat the small stuff, basically, the way grown-ups always told you.

He knew he was faster than everybody else at St. Patrick's School. And at Springs School, for that matter. Nobody on either side of town could get in front of him. He was the best passer his age, even better than Ty R
oss, who was better at everything in sports than just about anybody. He knew that when it was just kids—which is the way kids always liked it in sports—and the parents were out of the gym or off the playground and you got to just play without a whistle blowing every ten seconds or somebody yelling out more instructions, he was always one of the first picked, because the other guys on his team, the shooters especially, knew he'd get them the ball.

Most kids, his dad told him one time, know something about basketball that even most grown-ups never figure out.

One good passer changes everything.

Danny could pass, which is why he'd always made the team.

Almost always.

But no matter what was happening with any team he'd ever played on, no matter how tired he would be after practice, no matter how much homework he still had left, this driveway was still his special place. Like a special club with a membership of one, the place where he could come out at this time of night and imagine it up good, imagine it big and bright, even with just the one floodlight over the backboard and the other light, smaller, over the back door. His mother had done everything she could to make the driveway wider back here, even cutting into what little backyard they had the summer before last. "I told them you needed more room in the corners," she said. "The men from the paving company. They just nodded at me, like corners were some sort of crucial guy thing."

"Right up there with the remote control switcher for the TV," Danny said. "And leaving wet towels on the bathroom floor."

"How are the corners now?"

"Perfect," he said. "Like at the Garden."

He had just enough room in the corners now, mostly for shooting. He didn't feel as if he was trying to make a drive to the basket in his closet. Or an elevator car. He had room to maneuver, pretend he really was at the real Garden, that he was one of the small fast guys who'd made it all the way there. Like Muggsy Bogues, somebody he'd read up on when one of his coaches told him to, who was only 5-3 and made it to the NBA. Like Tiny Archibald and Bobby Hurley and Earl Boykins, a 5-5 guy who came out of the basketball minor leagues, another streak of light who showed everybody that more than size mattered, even in hoops.

And, of course, Richie Walker.

Middletown's own.

Danny would put chairs out there and dribble through them like he was dribbling out the clock at the end of the game. Some nights he would borrow a pair of his mother's old sunglasses and tape the bottom part of the lens so he couldn't see the ball unless he looked straight down at it. This was back when he was first trying to perfect the double crossover, before he even had a chance to do it right, his hands being too little and his arms not being nearly long enough.

Sometimes he'd be so dog tired when he finished—though he would never cop to that with his mom—he'd fall into bed with his clothes on and nearly fall asleep that way.

"You done?" she'd say when she came in to say good night.

"I finally got bored," he'd say, and she'd say with a smile, "I always worry about that, you getting bored by basketball."

Everybody he'd ever read up on, short or tall, had talked about how they outworked everybody else. Magic Johnson, he knew, won the championship his rookie season with the Lakers, scored forty-two points in the final game of the championship series when he had to play center because Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was hurt, then went back to East Lansing, Michigan, where he was from, in the summer and worked on his outside shooting because he'd decided it wasn't good enough.

Tonight, Danny had worked past the time when his mom usually called him in, not even noticing how cold it had gotten for October. Worked underneath the new backboard she'd gotten for him at the end of the summer. Not the only kid in his class with divorced parents now. Not the smallest kid on the court now. Just the only one. He'd drive to the basket and then hit one of the chairs with one of his lookaway passes. Or he'd step back and make a shot from the outside. Sometimes, breathing hard, like it was a real game, he'd step to the free throw line he'd drawn with chalk and make two free throws for the championship of something.

Just him and the ball and the feel of it in his hands and the whoosh of it going through the net and the sound one of the old wooden school chairs would make when he tipped it over with another bounce pass. He knew he was wearing out another pair of sneakers his mom called "old school," which to Danny always meant "on sale." Or that she had found his size at either the Nike store or the Reebok store at the factory outlet mall about forty-five minutes from Middletown, both of them knowing she couldn't afford what Athlete's Foot or Foot Locker was charging for the new Kobe sneakers from Nike, or Iverson's, or McGrady's. Or the cool new LeBron James kicks that so many of the Springs School kids were wearing this year.

He finished the way he always did, trying to cleanly execute the crossover-and-back five times in a row, low enough to the ground to be like a rock he was skipping across Taylor Lake. Five times usually making it an official good night out here.

Except.

Except this was as far from a good night as he'd ever known.

Basically, this was the worst night of his whole life.

Danny's mother, Ali, watched him from his bedroom window on the second floor, standing to the side of the window in the dark room, trying not to let him see her up here, even though she could see him sneaking a look occasionally, especially when he'd do something fine down on the court, sink a long one or make a left-handed layup or execute that tricky dribble he was always working on.

Sometimes he'd do it right and come right out of it and be on his way to the basket, so fast she thought he should leave a puff of smoke like one of those old Road Runner cartoons.

God, you're getting old, she thought. Did kids even know who the Road Runner was anymore?

"Nice work with that double dribble," she'd tell him sometimes when he finally came in the house, tired even if he'd never admit that to her.

"Mom, you know it's not a double dribble. This"—showing her on the kitchen floor with the ball that was on its way up to his room with him—"is a double crossover."

"Whatever it is," she'd say, "don't do it in the kitchen."

That would get a smile out of her boy sometimes.

The boy who had cried when he told her his news tonight.

He was twelve now. And never let her see him cry unless he took a bad spill in a game or in the driveway, or got himself all tied up because he was afraid he was going to fail some test, even though he never did.

But tonight her son cried in the living room and let her hug him as she told him she hoped this was the worst thing that ever happened to him.

"If it is," she said, "you're going to have an even happier life than I imagined for you."

She pushed back a little and smoothed out some of his blond hair, spikey now because he'd been wearing one of his four thousand baseball caps while he played.

"What do I always tell you?" she said.

Without looking up at her, reciting it like she was helping him learn his part in a school play, Danny said, "Nobody imagines up things better than you do."

"There you go."

Another one of their games.

Except on this night he suddenly said, "So how come you can't imagine a happier life for us now?"

Then got up from the couch and ran out of the room and the next thing she heard was the bounce of the ball in the driveway. Like the real beat of his heart.

Or their lives.

She waited a while, cleaned up their dinner dishes, even though that never took long with just the two of them, finished correcting some test papers. Then she went up to his room and watched him try to play through this, the twelve-year-old who went through life being asked if he was ten, or nine, or eight.

Ali saw what she always saw, even tonight, when he was out here with the fierce expression on his face, hardly ever smiling, even as he dreamed his dreams, imagining for himself now, imagining up a happy life for himself, one where he wasn't always the smallest. One where all people saw was the size of his talent, all that speed, all the magic things he could do with a basketball in either hand.

No matter how much she tried not to, she saw all his father in him.

He was all the way past the house, on his way to making the right on Cleveland Avenue, when he saw the light at the end of the driveway, and saw the little boy back there.

He stopped the car.

Or maybe it stopped itself.

He was good at blaming, why not blame the car?

What was that old movie where Jack Nicholson played the retired astronaut? He couldn't remember the name, just that Shirley MacLaine was in it, too, and she was going around with Jack, and then her daughter got sick and the whole thing turned into a major chick flick.

There was this scene where Nicholson was trying to leave town, but the daughter was sick, and even though he didn't care about too much other than having fun, he couldn't leave because Shirley MacLaine needed him.

You think old Jack is out of there, adios, and then he shows up at the door, that smile on his face, and says, "Almost a clean getaway."

He used to think his life was a movie. Enough people used to tell him that it was.

He parked near the corner of Cleveland and Earl, then walked halfway back up the block, across the street from 422 Earl, still wondering what he was doing on this street tonight, cruising this neighborhood, in this stupid small small-minded town.