

"GOING THE DISTANCE"

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FADE IN:

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - DAY - DECEMBER

A hand turns a spigot on an old chipped porcelain sink.

It spits and sputters, belching brackish water at first, then runs clean.

A thirteen year old boy, CORY MAGEE, fills a beaten and well used aluminum pot with water and puts it on an old fashioned gas range.

He strikes a wooden match and lights the flame.

He shivers and feels the big cast iron radiator, then kicks it a few times.

He rubs his arms, rekindles the spent wooden match from the rangetop and lights the oven.

He puts a sweatshirt on over his long underwear.

The kitchen walls and ceiling are blotched with fallen plaster and peeling paint.

The furnishings are scant and basic, a kitchen table, three chairs, a small couch and a television. There is no living room.

A single bare light bulb hangs from a frayed cord over the table.

Cory washes his face in the kitchen sink and dries himself with a worn towel.

A CAT MEOWS. Cory picks it up and kisses it.

CORY

Hungry, boy?

Cory reaches above the sink for a box of cat food from an enameled metal wall cabinet that appears to have once been white.

Its contents are meager, dried beans, cereal grains, peanut butter, all in plain packaging or tin containers marked "USDA, Not For Retail Sale".

There is a RATTLE of pots and pans from beneath the sink.

Cory pulls aside the plastic skirting covering the under-sink storage area and a pan falls out.

The brown tail of a Norway RAT slithers between some pots.

Cory picks up the cat and sics it on the rat.

CORY
(continuing)
Look, boy, breakfast. Go get
him.

The cat PURRS and rubs itself against Cory's neck.

CORY
(continuing)
Forget it, I'll do it myself.

Cory scatters pots and pans on the floor chasing the rat as it scrambles behind them.

He reaches in the back of the storage area and grabs the rat by the scruff of its neck and pulls it out.

CORY
(continuing)
Gottcha!

The rat is huge, almost as big as the cat.

Cory holds it up and admonishes it.

CORY
(continuing)
If Mom finds you out of your
cage you'll be out in an alley
with your cousins...

He kisses the rat.

CORY
(continuing)
... and you won't like it.

He puts the rat down by a recycled aluminum pie plate where the cat sits patiently, watching Cory.

He fills the plate with dry cat food.

The two pets eat amicably together.

Cory gets a dish and a box of oatmeal from the cabinet.

He puts the dish on a well worn kitchen table and fills it with oatmeal,

mixes in hot water from the stove,

puts on a Walkman headset, opens a schoolbook and eats his breakfast while he studies.

He taps his finger to the beat of music only he can hear while he reads and eats.

A window behind Cory opens silently.

An arm, a leg, then DWAIN, Cory's teenage brother enters the kitchen from a fire escape.

He sneaks up behind Cory and pounces on him in a mugging fashion.

CORY
(continuing)
Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

Cory yells and flails his arms at his unseen attacker, who laughs and messes up his hair.

CORY
(continuing)
Dwain, you geek. Why can't you use the door like normal people.

DWAIN
Mom just got off the bus... you keep your mouth shut about me being out all night, understand, twerp? I'm going to bed.

CORY
What about school?

DWAIN
Hey, I know all I need to know.
I'm quitting.

CORY
Mom's not going to like it.

DWAIN
She won't mind when I bring
home some big bucks. Meantime,
you keep quiet.

CORY
I'm not lying for you, Dwain.

DWAIN
You do what I say, or I'll twist
your little arm till you cry,
nerdball.

Dwain goes into a back room.

There is the SOUND of a key in the door to the
apartment.

Cory quickly puts his pet rat in its cage as their
MOM, ELSBETH MAGEE, enters the kitchen from the
apartment building hallway.

She is a tired looking woman of thirty-ish, dressed in
a soiled and faded blue hospital uniform.

CORY
Hi, Mom. Rough night?

Cory kisses her, takes her coat and hangs it up.

MOM
Mornin' darlin'. I'm exhausted.
Is Dwain in bed?

CORY
Yes.

MOM
Please get him up for school.
(MORE)

MOM (cont'd)

I have to go to bed. I'm so tired all the time. I empty bedpans in my sleep. I'm so sick of this job... I'm losing my mind.

CORY

A mind is a terrible thing to lose.

MOM

That's waste, Cory. A mind is a terrible thing to waste.

CORY

I was trying to be funny, Mom.

He crushes a piece of paper into a ball and tosses it at a waste basket.

It misses and the wad falls next to a pile of others on the floor.

He sighs with frustration, picks them up and slam dunks each one noisily into the trash.

MOM

Homework done?

CORY

Sure.

MOM

I should have to ask.

She hugs him close and hard.

MOM

(continuing)

I wish I could give you more.

CORY

Why don't you try to become a real nurse.

MOM

I'm too old... and it costs money, money we don't have.

(MORE)

MOM (cont'd)

I don't even have a high school diploma.

CORY

How much money?

MOM

Lots.

CORY

How much is lots?

MOM

Thousands.

CORY

That's lots. Where do people get that kind of money?

MOM

I wish I knew. Anyway, I'm too old and it's too late... and, I'm tired.

Cory gives her a reassuring hug.

MOM

(continuing)

Dwain, get up.

DWAIN (O.S.)

I'm sick, Mom. I'm staying home.

MOM

(kissing Cory)

Here's some lunch money. 'Bye darlin'.

She goes into her bedroom.

CORY

(to his pets)

'Bye boys. See you later.

Cory kisses the cat, puts on his coat, grabs his book bag and leaves the apartment.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE APARTMENT - DAY

Cory emerges from the tenement apartment building.

The street he lives on is a NOISY and busy inner city thoroughfare.

Litter covers the sidewalks.

Businesses are boarded up.

A liquor store owner unlocks the metal grating over the storefront.

A patron waits patiently blowing into his cupped hands.

Here and there stripped cars lie abandoned.

A local MECHANIC is changing the oil in his car. The oil flows freely into a sewer grating.

Older MEN huddle around fires in barrels, warming their hands, drinking cheap wine and whiskey from pint bottles, some openly, some from small paper bags.

Cory is met by another boy his age, SHAWN, a friend and classmate.

SHAWN

You see that game last night?

CORY

No, I had homework.

SHAWN

So did I, but I can't let it interfere with my future career. Don't you ever take a break?

CORY

Sure, when I'm done with my homework.

SHAWN

Why do I hang out with you? We have so little in common.

CORY

Because you need to copy
someone's homework?

SHAWN

That's a good reason. I teach
you how to play basketball and
you do my homework... There's
a word for that. What's it
called?

CORY

Besides cheating?

SHAWN

Yeah, besides cheating.

CORY

It's called a symbiotic
relationship.

SHAWN

Yeah, that's it. We're a regular
pair of symbiotics.

They run to the corner to catch the city bus, show
their passes and join other KIDS on their way to school.

EXT. HORACE MANN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL - DAY -
ESTABLISHING

The school resembles a medieval fortress, dark, gray
and forbidding.

The school property is surrounded by concrete and an
ten foot high chain link fence.

Heavy iron mesh grating covers the windows.

The reinforced steel doors are equipped for padlocks.

Gangs of KIDS in distinctive colors and styles of
clothing mill around the sidewalks and the fenced
schoolyard.

They huddle in small groups, looking furtively about
as they sneak puffs on cigarettes.

Some pitch pennies up against the school wall.

Others play a game of cards.

A few precocious couples kiss openly.

Kids being kids jostle each other.

A pushing and shoving match goes on but no one gets hurt.

Some older boys with dangerous looks talk quietly (M.O.S.), trading and pocketing unseen items.

A bell RINGS and the students move into the building.

INT. SCHOOL HALL - DAY

The entrance hall is LOUD and dingy, dirty and dimly lit.

A water fountain runs without help.

The little original paint that has survived is reminiscent of gas chamber green.

Shawn and Cory blend into the crowd of KIDS.

SHAWN

Got your book report on "Treasure Island"?

CORY

Yeah, you?

SHAWN

No, I didn't finish it.

CORY

The book or the report?

SHAWN

Neither.

They enter a classroom.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - CONTINUOUS

The room is packed with noisy, boisterous KIDS.

They whistle and laugh as they throw spitballs at each other.

A few actually study from open books.

The TEACHER seems oblivious to it all.

TEACHER

A little order, please... some quiet.

The class settles in.

TEACHER

(continuing)

All right, future leaders of our nation, I am sure that you have all enjoyed your reading assignment, "Treasure Island". Do we have a volunteer to give a book report,...

The class suddenly becomes dead silent,

TEACHER

(continuing)

... perhaps remind the rest of us who have already forgotten, what it was about?

except for Cory and one girl, YOLANDA, who both raise their hands.

The rest stare in unison at their desks, faces and bodies motionless.

TEACHER

(continuing)

I am overwhelmed by your enthusiastic response. I don't know how we'll be able to hear all of your reports in the little time we have.

Cory looks around the room.

He gets cold stares in return.

Yolanda waves her hand eagerly.

TEACHER
 (continuing)
 Mister Magee, we have your
 undivided attention.

Cory walks to the front of the room.

As he goes down the aisle and faces the class, BOYS
 whisper derogatory remarks AD LIB.

BOYS
 Brownie. Suck up. A.K.

He ignores them.

CORY
 "Treasure Island", by Robert
 Louis Stevenson. "Treasure
 Island" is the greatest adventure
 story I have ever read.

The class gives out a collective moan and more AD LIB
 remarks.

BOYS
 Oh, really, adventure boy?
 Ever hear of 'X-Men'? More
 exciting than 'Bambi'?

They chuckle under their breath.

Yolanda frowns and shushes them.

TEACHER
 A little quietus in the
 intellectual wasteland may be
 appropriate.

The comments subside.

TEACHER
 (continuing)
 Thank you very much.

Cory continues to read his report (M.O.S.).

SERIES OF SHOTS

A. The others throw wads of paper at each other,

- B. write notes,
- C. whisper among themselves,
- D. stare out the window and
- E. generally ignore the report.
- F. Yolanda is the only one who pays attention throughout.
- G. She nods in agreement occasionally.

SERIES OF SHOTS ENDS

CORY

I recommend "Treasure Island"
to everyone...

There are more groans and snickering.

CORY

(continuing)

... and if you can find the
edition with the illustrations
by an artist named Wyeth, get
it. They are great!

TEACHER

Thank you, Cory, for that
insightful report.

Cory takes his seat amid more AD LIB teasing from the
class.

CLASS

Good report, geeko. Oh yeah,
insightful.

TEACHER

Yolanda, you're up.

Yolanda walks to the front of the class.

She is accompanied by a cadence of foot stomping and
applause.

Yolanda is not bothered by anything.

She is a very confident thirteen year old.

YOLANDA

Please, save your applause for
the end.

The class hoots and heckles AD LIB as before.

CLASS

Miss Snooty Pie. Know it all.
Teacher's pet.

YOLANDA

I liked this book even though
it didn't have any female role
models in it.

The class laughs out loud.

TEACHER

Perhaps you should read "A Woman
Of Independent Means".

YOLANDA

I have.

TEACHER

Meanwhile, this is the Eighth
Grade, and "Treasure Island" is
the required reading.

YOLANDA

I still think the reading
assignments should be more
diverse.

TEACHER

I'll speak to the Board of
Education.

YOLANDA

Thank you. "Treasure Island"
is truly a great adventure novel,
despite its shortcomings, but I
won't dwell on that...

The class once again involves itself in distractions
as Yolanda reads her report (M.O.S.).

Only Cory seems to be interested.

The bell RINGS for lunch as Yolanda finishes her report.

The class becomes animated and noisy.

The kids ignore the teacher's AD LIB pleas for order,

TEACHER
Children, young ladies and
gentlemen, please, some decorum
in the forum.

as they get up and leave the room.

INT. SCHOOL HALL - DAY

Cory, Shawn and Yolanda head for the lunchroom together.

SHAWN
That was good, you guys. I
wish I had read the book. Oh,
well, maybe they'll make it
into a movie someday.

Cory and Yolanda look at each other and shake their
heads.

The same surreptitious activity that takes place in
the school yard earlier continues among small groups
of students in the halls.

CORY
This place gets scarier every
day.

YOLANDA
My dad has an offer of a job in
another city. I might be moving.

CORY
Lucky you. I wish I could go
with you.
(to Yolanda)
We'll meet you in the cafeteria.
Save us a seat.

Cory and Shawn go to the boys' room.

INT. SCHOOL - BOY'S TOILET - DAY

OLDER BOYS attempt to hide cigarettes and wave away smoke as other boys enter.

Cory is singled out as the patsy.

Shawn is a little too big for these bullies to bully, but not big enough to stand up for Cory or himself.

OLDER BOY#1
(to Cory at the urinal)
Hey punk, got any cigarettes?

CORY
No.

OLDER BOY#1
How about lending me some money?
I'm a little short.

The others in his gang laugh.

OLDER BOY#1
(continuing)
Pay you back tomorrow, promise.

The gang members let out a big roar.

CORY
Sorry! I was already mugged on
the way to school.

OLDER BOY#2
(to older boy#1)
How much you need? I'll lend
it to you.

OLDER BOY#1
Gimme a buck.

Older boy#2 gives older boy#1 a dollar.

OLDER BOY#2

(to Cory)

Now you owe it to me, punk,
and I expect you to pay me back
tomorrow, with interest, get
it?

(laughing)

Or your credit's no good.

The gang members roar again.

Cory and Shawn exit as quickly as possible as the other
boys jostle and shove them around.

INT. SCHOOL HALL - DAY

CORY

Man, I have to get out of here.

SHAWN

Make sure you write.

They head for the cafeteria.

INT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - DAY

KIDS mill about noisily.

They stand in line for prepared food.

A boy beats on a vending machine that ate his money.

The tables are almost all filled.

Cory and Shawn go through the food line and get
sandwiches.

Yolanda waves them over to her table.

YOLANDA

Good job with your book report,
Cory. I really liked it.

CORY

Thanks, it was fun reading, and
besides, it gave me a chance to
get out of here.

SHAWN

What do you mean, get out of here?

Cory indicates 'here' by waving his arms.

CORY

I mean, 'here'!

YOLANDA

It's called escapism, Shawn. You escape into the story. It's what people did before movies and television.

SHAWN

And if they didn't like to read?

YOLANDA

They played basketball.

SHAWN

(to Cory)
See, there's hope.

YOLANDA

Besides the beauty of our language, we can enjoy the vicarious pleasure of adventure and danger without leaving home or getting hurt.

SHAWN

You're a genius.

YOLANDA

Thank you.
(to Cory)
How's your writing coming along?

CORY

Kind of slow. I'm working on a story about a boy who feeds his pet rat irradiated food pellets. It mutates into a giant that follows him to school and eats the punks who hustle his lunch money.

YOLANDA

You're weird sometimes.

CORY

You write what you know.

A bell RINGS.

CORY

(continuing)

I hate gym. Why do we always have gym right after lunch? I have all I can do not to throw up.

SHAWN

You need some basketball practice. Stick with me. I'll get you in a game.

INT. SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - DAY - LATER

In gym, Cory stands on the sidelines as two TEAMS choose up sides for a basketball game.

Cory is last to be chosen, even though one team has only four players.

SHAWN

We can't play with only four men. We're outnumbered. This is stupid. Let Cory play.

TEAMMATE#1

He only gets in the way. We're better off with empty space. At least we won't trip over him.

TEAM

(in unison)

Yeah.

TEAMMATE#1

He can be our cheerleader. We need a cheerleader.

TEAM
 (in unison)
 Yeah.

SHAWN
 If he doesn't play, I don't
 play.

The Team acquiesces reluctantly.

TEAM
 (in unison)
 Okay, he can play.

His teammates all shake their heads while the opposing team cheers.

SHAWN
 Come on, Cory.
 (whispering)
 Try not to lose the ball, please.

TEAMMATE#1
 If it does happen to stick to
 your fingers, give it to one of
 us. Don't even try to make a
 basket. At least, don't lose
 it.

At the tip-off, Cory accidentally gets the ball.

SHAWN
 Pass it to me. Pass it to me.

It is immediately apparent that Cory can't dribble or run.

He bounces the ball off his own foot and then trips over it.

The ball is stolen from him.

The opposing team scores first as one of them makes an easy lay-up.

Cory's teammates groan and their opponents laugh.

TEAMMATE#1
 Great job so far, 'Magic'.

SHAWN

(to Cory)

Don't worry about it. We can't
all be Larry Bird or Michael
Jordan.

The game continues with Cory all but ignored.

These kids are good and Shawn is the best among them.

SERIES OF SHOTS

- A. Shawn dribbles between his legs.
- B. He feints around the opposing team.
- C. He makes impossible hook shots from the keyhole,
- D. and jump shots from half-court.
- E. He is deadly from the foul line.
- F. He leads the team in rebounds.
- G. He constantly steals the ball.
- H. Cory tries to stay out of the way.
- I. The game goes on around him at a furious pace,
- J. but he gets fouls called against him,
- K. he gets knocked down, and
- L. even has his head used to carom the ball between
opposing players.

SERIES OF SHOTS ENDS

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE SCHOOL - DAY - LATER

CORY

I've got to get out of here.

SHAWN

At least I have a chance. I
can play ball. Maybe even pro
ball. I'm good.

CORY

Not to burst your bubble, Shawn,
but do you have any idea what
your chances are? About one in
a million.

SHAWN

Or maybe a sportscaster.

CORY

You're already overqualified
for that job.

SHAWN

Well, it beats no chance at
all. When you think of a better
way, let me know.

CORY

There has to be a way. I am
not going to live like this.

As they walk to the bus stop, their bus pulls away.

CORY

(continuing)
Great, what next?

EXT. STREETS THROUGH THE CITY - DAY

They start walking home.

The city street scene reflects economic decay.

They pass boarded up stores.

Windows of unoccupied houses are broken.

Entry ways are chiseled through cement blocks into
vacant buildings.

Homeless lie on benches beside shopping carts of all
their worldly possessions.

The boys take a shortcut through a vacant lot between
two bombed out buildings,

where they are accosted by KOOL, a sinister looking
teen.

EXT. VACANT LOT - DAY

Kool blocks their way.

CORY'S P.O.V. - KOOL

KOOL

Well, well, well. What do we
have here? New in the 'hood,
boys?

BACK TO SCENE

Cory knows Kool by reputation.

CORY

Just passing through, goodbye.

KOOL

Not before you pay the toll,
boys, and I am the toll
collector.

CORY

We have city passes.

He flashes his bus pass.

CORY

(continuing)
They're good for transfers and
shortcuts.

KOOL

You got a smart mouth, chump.
Let's see your wallet.

Cory's brother, Dwain, witnesses the scene as he happens
along.

DWAIN

Yo, Kool, my man. What's
happening?

KOOL

I got me a couple of ripe little
chumps, here. They got to pay
the toll.

DWAIN

This here chump's my little brother. And this chump here's his bud. They got a pass. I gave it to them.

KOOL

Well then, they got to pay the club dues.

Dwain does his best to extricate his brother from the situation, but Kool is the dominant personality.

DWAIN

Their dues is paid up, man. I paid them.

Kool exercises his authority by pronouncing his decision settling the matter.

KOOL

Well then, they got to perform some social services.

(to Dwain)

Nobody walks on my turf without showing some respect to the Kool.

(to Cory and Shawn)

How about it chumps? You help me out, you make yourself some candy money.

Cory and Shawn exchange glances.

They know they face a dilemma.

They can't run and they can't hide.

Shawn lets Cory do the talking.

CORY

Doing what?

KOOL

From time to time, I need some right hand men, kinda look over my shoulder for me while I transact business.

CORY

Lookouts?

KOOL

You are one smart little chump.

Kool pats Cory on the cheek.

KOOL

(continuing)

I like you.

Cory pushes his hand away.

CORY

What kind of business you in?

KOOL

Retailing, soon to be wholesale.
I recently expanded my business
into this territory. My
predecessor was involuntarily
retired.

CORY

What exactly do you sell?

KOOL

Let's just say I provide a needed
commodity to a special group of
consumers. Lots of room to
grow, and it beats flippin'
burgers. You could graduate to
sales if you're a fast learner.

CORY

(to Dwain)

You a fast learner?

DWAIN

Beats flippin' burgers.

CORY

Sounds too easy to be legal.

KOOL

Well now, the chump's a lawyer.

CORY
We're both pretty busy, school
and stuff. Lots of homework...

SHAWN
... basketball practice...

CORY
... can't fit it in.

KOOL
Let me put it this way.

Kool is emphatic in his demands and he makes it clear to the boys that there is no alternative.

KOOL
(continuing)
You're either in or out, either
with me or against me. You
ain't in Switzerland.

Kool grabs Cory violently by his collar.

KOOL
(continuing)
Get it, chump?

Dwain pulls Kool off Cory and stands between them.

DWAIN
All right, lay off, Kool.

A neighborhood beat POLICEMAN appears and yells.

CORY'S P.O.V. - THE POLICEMAN

He is big!

He shakes his nightstick at them and runs towards them.

POLICEMAN
You, knock it off. Come here,
I want to talk to all of you.

BACK TO SCENE

DWAIN
(to Cory and Shawn)
Get out of here.

They scatter in different directions.

Kool disappears into a vacant factory.

Dwain beats it down an alley and over a fence into another abandoned building.

Shawn leaves Cory in his dust as they make a beeline for the nearest street.

The officer gets a good look at Cory.

CORY'S P.O.V. - THE POLICEMAN

POLICEMAN
(to Cory)
I'm looking out for you.

EXT. STREETS THROUGH THE CITY - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Cory and Shawn are separated.

Cory runs a few blocks as fast as he can, which isn't very fast.

He's panting and out of breath.

He turns a corner and ducks into a doorway.

He stands in a shadow with his back against the door.

He tries to hold his breath but gasps for air.

He listens for sounds of anyone following him.

He hears heavy footsteps approaching on the run.

He tries the door behind him. It's open.

He backs into the building and shuts the door quietly.

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - DAY

He stops dead in his tracks.

CORY'S P.O.V. - THE READING ROOM

Cory looks around and realizes that he's in the public library.

His path is blocked by an officious looking woman.

Cory knows her. She is the librarian, MISS HUXLEY.

She says nothing, but her face says, "Don't you fool with me."

It is quiet.

A few people sit at tables.

They are reading books, magazines and newspapers.

BACK TO SCENE

He quietly walks through the reference section, fingering the bindings of the books.

He picks out an Encyclopedia at random without paying any attention to its contents, and

sits down in a far corner.

He tries to appear invisible.

The Policeman comes in and looks around.

He looks in Cory's direction.

Cory cowers behind the book.

The policeman talks (M.O.S.) with the librarian while pointing to Cory, then leaves.

She comes over to him.

She stands over him with her arms folded.

He pretends he doesn't see her.

Taking the encyclopedia from him, she says,

MISS HUXLEY
Come with me, young man.

He follows her to the reference table.

She piles some books in his arms.

MISS HUXLEY
(continuing)
Take these books and put them
on the shelf over there.

He obeys without question.

She follows him with more books.

MISS HUXLEY
(continuing)
I know you. You come in here
often. What's your name?

CORY
Cory Magee, Ma'am.

MISS HUXLEY
I'm Miss Huxley. You're one of
the few neighborhood boys who
take advantage of the library.

CORY
We don't have any books at home.
I like to read.
(pause)
I'd like to be a writer, I think.
I like to write.

They replace the books as they talk.

MISS HUXLEY
Really? I like to write too.
I've had some articles published
in literary magazines, mostly
about education.

She takes one of Cory's books from the shelf where he
misplaced it.

MISS HUXLEY

(continuing)

Her, give me that. It goes here.

She puts it on the right shelf.

MISS HUXLEY

(continuing)

What do you like to write about?

CORY

Mostly fantasy, sci-if stuff, kid stuff. I'd like to write about sports since that's all my best friend Shawn and I talk about. I can't play very well, but I am good at memorizing statistics.

MISS HUXLEY

Now there's a story... about a boy who can't play at sports but he knows the batting average of every player in history.

Cory stops and listens attentively.

MISS HUXLEY

(continuing)

Maybe he wins a quiz show, maybe he gets to be a team mascot, a big league bat boy. You've got a story there, Cory, and you don't even know it.

CORY

Wow! You're right. But what are his chances... realistically? Who'd believe it? What are my chances? One in a million, like Shawn's chances at becoming a pro basketball player.

MISS HUXLEY

Good fiction is life raised to the level of metaphor. The writer makes it happen... just like in real life... we can make things happen.

CORY
What's a metaphor?

MISS HUXLEY
There's a dictionary. Look it
up.

Cory opens the tome.

CORY
How do you spell it?

MISS HUXLEY
Pronounce it one syllable at a
time. It's all there, all very
neat and orderly. You might
say in alphabetical order.

Cory thumbs through it, flipping pages back and forth
until he finds the word.

CORY
Metaphor... a figurative
expression, symbolism... like
my life... stuck in quicksand.
I've got to get out of here.

Cory pushes the cart full of reference books between
the stacks. As they talk he thumbs through them and
Miss Huxley places them on shelves.

MISS HUXLEY
Well, you seem to be a bright
boy. Thinking about college?

CORY
I'm lucky I have lunch money.

MISS HUXLEY
There are always scholarships.

CORY
I can't dribble a basketball.

MISS HUXLEY
Academic scholarships. You can
take tests. You'd be surprised
at what you can do.

He thumbs through a big picture book of flowers.

CORY

My Mom loves mums. They're her favorite flower.

MISS HUXLEY

Yes, I like chrysanthemums too.

CORY

Chrysanthemums? I didn't know they were called that.

Cory pauses for a moment. He is thinking.

CORY

(continuing)

Oh, 'mums'.

He gives the book to Miss Huxley and she puts it on a shelf as they continue.

MISS HUXLEY

What do your parents do, Cory?

CORY

I never knew my father. Mom never mentions his name. She works in a hospital as an orderly or something... a dead end job... a lot like quicksand. She'd like to be a real nurse, but... no money.

She continues to put books back on the shelves while they talk.

As they pass a bulletin board, Cory sees a flyer.

CORY'S P.O.V. - INSERT - THE FLYER

Which reads, 'Enter The All America Spelling Bee', First Place Prize Money, \$5,000.00'

BACK TO SCENE

CORY

What's this spelling bee thing?

MISS HUXLEY

It's a nationwide contest open to every school in the country. Unfortunately, our city schools don't participate.

CORY

That's a lot of money.

MISS HUXLEY

The local newspaper publisher and I have been trying to get the school board involved, but they just aren't interested.

CORY

I'd like to try that. It doesn't cost anything.

MISS HUXLEY

It's a lot of hard work.

CORY

How bad could I do? I'm good at memorizing things.

MISS HUXLEY

Oh? Spell 'chrysanthemum'.

CORY

'Chrysanthemum', C-h-r-y-s-a-n-t-h-e-m-u-m, chrysanthemum.

MISS HUXLEY

I'm impressed.

She pauses and nods her head a few times.

MISS HUXLEY

(continuing)

I think it might be a good time to approach the school board again.

CORY

How do you expect to get them to change their minds if they've never been interested before?

MISS HUXLEY

I have a plan. In the meanwhile, I am going to give you the study books, and you had better get busy studying. The contests must be held on local school levels in February and March, with City finals in April and the National finals in Washington, D.C. in May. We don't have a moment to lose.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - DAY - LATER

Cory flips through the word study book, an anxious expression on his face.

CORY

Holy cow. I can't see how I can learn to spell all these words. There must be three thousand of them, and I've never even seen them before.

MISS HUXLEY

If it were easy, why would they give a prize of five thousand dollars? Think of each word being worth a dollar. That's worth learning.

CORY

That's only three thousand dollars. Where's the other two thousand?

MISS HUXLEY

They're over there in the dictionary. Find them.

CORY

What do they mean. How are they pronounced?

MISS HUXLEY

It's all here in the pronunciation guide.

SERIES OF SHOTS

In the scenes that follow,

Cory takes the book with him wherever he goes.

He reads the word aloud (M.O.S.).

He looks away and spells it.

He makes mistakes and frowns.

He spells the words correctly and smiles.

A. He studies in the library,

B. He studies at home,

C. On the bus,

D. In the cafeteria,

E. In the gym,

F. Between classes and,

SERIES OF SHOTS ENDS

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

To his teacher's dismay, when he should be paying attention in class.

TEACHER

Mister Magee, Mister Magee,
perhaps when you have time you
can join the rest of us?

The class laughs as the bell RINGS.

The class leaves noisily as usual as the Teacher shakes his head.

INT. SCHOOL HALL - DAY - MOMENTS LATER

Yolanda catches up with Cory and Shawn.

YOLANDA

Cory, what are you up to? You don't pay attention, you don't raise your hand.

She tries to see the word book in Cory's hand.

YOLANDA

(continuing)

What's that book you have your nose buried in?

CORY

It's a word book. I'm studying for a spelling bee.

He shows her the book.

She flips through it as they walk.

YOLANDA

Spelling bee? What spelling bee? I haven't heard anything about a spelling bee. Since when do we have a spelling bee?

CORY

We will soon. A friend of mine is working on it. The winner gets big prize money.

YOLANDA

I want in on this, Cory. You're supposed to be my friend and you've been keeping this a big secret?

CORY

Nothing happened yet.

YOLANDA

You're not afraid because I can spell better than you?

CORY

No, I'm not afraid. Anyway, the odds of either of us winning are a zillion to one. No reason why we both can't try.

INT. BOARD OF EDUCATION - MEETING ROOM - DAY - A WEEK LATER

Miss Huxley is meeting with the School Board PRESIDENT and its MEMBERS. Cory waits outside in the hall.

MISS HUXLEY

I've spoken to the publisher of the city newspaper. He is more than willing to sponsor the City Schools in the All America Spelling Bee. All we ask is that the Board commit itself to participation.

The Board members collectively shake their heads and mumble negatively AD LIB as she gives her presentation.

PRESIDENT

We've never had the Bee before because we've never had any good spellers. Hell, these kids can't spell; they can hardly read. They'll be humiliated. Let's face it; we're babysitting these kids until they're old enough to get a job.

MISS HUXLEY

And flip burgers the rest of their lives? Or worse yet, spend their lives in and out of institutions?

PRESIDENT

Someone has to pick up the garbage and mop the floors. What good could come of their being embarrassed?

MISS HUXLEY

How can they expect a chance if it doesn't start here? I have an exceptional eighth grader with me today. He wants to go to college. You know what his chances are? Nonexistent. This is a big opportunity for him.

PRESIDENT

Well, we're adamant. Unless you can show us some evidence that we can reasonably expect an outstanding performance... well, I'm afraid the answer is still, no.

He stands and gestures to the door.

PRESIDENT

(continuing)

Thank you for coming.

INT. BOARD OF EDUCATION - HALL - MOMENTS LATER

MISS HUXLEY

Don't worry, Cory, we'll sway their opinion somehow.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - DAY

Cory helps Miss Huxley put books away as she asks him words and he spells.

MISS HUXLEY

Bravura.

CORY

Bravura, b-r-a-v-u-r-a.

He makes normal mistakes and requires prompting.

MISS HUXLEY

Mononucleosis.

CORY

Mononucleosis, m-o-n-o-n-e-w-c-l-e-o-s-i-s.

MISS HUXLEY

No, try again. Think nucleus as in nucleus of an atom.

CORY
 Mononucleosis, m-o-n-o-n-u-c-l-
 e-o-s-i-s.

MISS HUXLEY
 Correct...

TOM WATSON enters carrying a box of books and a newspaper.

He is dressed in overalls; his hands are dirty.

MISS HUXLEY
 (continuing)
 Hi, Tom. Cory, this is Mister
 Watson, a friend of mine.

CORY
 Pleased to meet you, sir.

MISS HUXLEY
 Cory, please open this box and
 take the books out for me to
 catalogue.

WATSON
 Miss Huxley has told me a lot
 about you. You're a quick
 learner and a hard worker.
 Maybe you'd like to come and
 work with me.

CORY
 Thanks, but I don't want to be
 a newspaper boy.

WATSON
 Good luck.

Watson and Miss Huxley look at each other and shake their heads.

WATSON
 (continuing; to Miss
 Huxley)
 I understand that the Mayor has
 convinced the School Board to
 reconsider their participation
 in the Spelling Bee.
 (MORE)

WATSON (cont'd)

He suggested that a demonstration of Cory's ability might sway them.

MISS HUXLEY

Isn't that good news, Cory? It gives us a reason to work harder now.

Cory is pleased, but puzzled.

CORY

(to Watson)

How do you know what the Mayor said?

WATSON

I deliver his newspaper.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - DAY

Cory returns home after school and the library.

Dwain is on the couch watching TV.

CORY

Mom home?

DWAIN

Yeah, she's in bed, sick. I hope she can go to work tonight so I can get out of the house. I have plans to make some money with Kool.

CORY

On the night shift?

MOM (O.S.)

Cory, darlin', would you fix me some supper, please? I'm a little late.

CORY

Sure, Mom.

Cory opens a can of soup and puts it in a pot on the stove.

He lights the stove with a match.

DWAIN

Why don't you come along, man?
It'll get you in good with Kool.

CORY

I don't want to be in anything
with Kool.

DWAIN

You wouldn't have to do anything,
just keep lookout for cops or
other gangs from outside the
'hood.

CORY

What are you doing this for?
You know it's wrong. You could
end up in big trouble. How
would Mom feel if she knew?

DWAIN

She'll like the money. Maybe
I'll even make enough to send
you to college.

CORY

I'll get my money for college
some other way.

Cory studies the can's label.

DWAIN

Oh yeah, how? Playing
basketball? You're short, you're
a spaz, you can't dribble, you
can't run, you can't shoot, you
can't even throw a ball.

He ignores Dwain's taunts.

CORY

I'm going to college.

DWAIN

With what? Your good looks?
I'll make more money in a week
than you will in a year, dreamer.

Dwain turns away from Cory and watches television.

Cory practices spelling the chemical ingredients on the package labels as the soup warms up.

CORY

Monosodium glutamate, m-o-n-o-s-
o-d-i-u-m-g-l-u-t-a-m-a-t-e.
Carbohydrate, c-a-r-b-o-h-y-d-r-
a-t-e.

Mom comes into the kitchen, coughing and wheezing.

Cory puts out a bowl for the two of them.

Mom sits while Cory spoons out some soup into their bowls.

Mom takes a sip.

MOM

Hmmmm, that sure feels good on
my sore throat.

CORY

Why don't you stay in bed, Mom?

MOM

I'm going in early. I have to
work some overtime... we need
the extra money.

CORY

You can just do so much, then
you're back in bed sicker than
you were in the first place.

MOM

I only wish I had the luxury to
lay in bed. Sick or no sick, I
have to go to work.

They finish eating.

Cory cleans up while Mom puts on her coat.

She kisses him goodbye and leaves, coughing.

CORY

I hate to see her go to work
sick like that.

DWAIN

That's what I mean, man. We
can help her out. Come on along.

EXT. VACANT LOT - NIGHT - LATER

Cory and Dwain meet Kool who is waiting in the shadows.

KOOL

Yo, short stuff. You bring
your smart mouth in case I need
some legal advice?

DWAIN

Lay off, Kool, he's with us.

KOOL

All right, my man, Cory. Seen
the light!

Kool offers Cory a "high five".

Cory keeps his hands in his pockets.

KOOL

(continuing)

Now, all you have to do is stay
right here out of sight. If
anybody comes along, anybody,
you give a little whistle.
Simple, right?

CORY

And where are you two going?

KOOL

I have some business in that
building over there, delicate
business. And we businessmen
don't like to be interrupted
while we're doing business,
understand?

EXT. ALLEY BETWEEN BUILDINGS NEAR THE VACANT LOT -
NIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

Cory is lookout at the end of an alley.

It is desolate and spookily quiet.

Suddenly a hand grabs him by the back of his neck and
scares the dickens out of him. He screams out loud.

CORY
Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

CORY'S P.O.V. - THE POLICEMAN

It is the same neighborhood beat policeman again.

BACK TO SCENE

Cory panics and tries to whistle but only air whooshes
out from between his pursed lips.

EXT. VACANT LOT - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Dwain, Kool and some OTHER MEN hear him and escape
over a fence.

They scatter in all directions.

EXT. ALLEY BETWEEN BUILDINGS NEAR THE VACANT LOT -
NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Cory can't run or jump, or get out of the policeman's
grip.

His feet skid beneath him as he tries to escape.

POLICEMAN
If I was a dog, I'd chew your
butt off. Get out of here.

The policeman kicks Cory in the butt and lets him go.

POLICEMAN

(continuing)

Next time I see you around here,
you're dog food.

Cory runs. The policeman yells after him.

POLICEMAN

(continuing)

I'm looking out for you.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - THE FOLLOWING DAY

Mom comes home, still sick.

Dwain is already in bed.

She makes breakfast for herself.

Cory plays with his pets and studies his spelling.

She sees some money on the table and picks it up.

MOM

Where did this come from?

CORY

Dwain.

Mom crushes it in her hand and cries quietly.

Then she puts it in a small file folder thick with
unpaid bills and goes to bed weeping.

INT. BOARD OF EDUCATION - MEETING ROOM - DAY

The School Board reconvenes.

The Board members pass around the word study book.

The members shake their heads as they read.

MISS HUXLEY

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'd like
you to meet Cory Magee, an eighth
grade student at Horace Mann.

The Board President flips through the pages of the word book.

PRESIDENT
 So you're the best speller in
 the city. Let's see here...
 (flips through the
 book)
 'Gingivitis'.

CORY
 'Gingivitis'. G-i-n-g-i-v-i-t-
 i-s. Gingivitis.

PRESIDENT
 'Thesaurus'.

CORY
 'Thesaurus'. One of my favorite
 words. T-h-e-s-a-u-r-u-s.

Miss Huxley sits with her fingers crossed under the table while this goes on.

MISS HUXLEY
 (whispering)
 Don't be cocky.

PRESIDENT
 'Syzygy'. I don't even know
 the meaning of that one.

CORY
 It refers to the conjunction or
 opposition of the planets with
 the sun. 'Syzygy'. S-y-z-y-g-
 y.

The spelling continues (M.O.S.).

The board members all nod and smile with each word Cory spells correctly.

The President scowls and studies the list more carefully.

PRESIDENT
 'Otolaryngology'.

CORY
'Otolaryngology'. O-t-o-l-a-r-y-n-g-o-l-o-g-y.

PRESIDENT
'Diphthong'.

CORY
'Diphthong'. D-i-p-t-h-o-n-g.

PRESIDENT
AHA! You misspelled it. You would have been eliminated in the first round.

MISS HUXLEY
May I see that book, Mister President.
(to the President)
'Diphthong'. Spell it please.

PRESIDENT
My ability is not being tested, Miss Huxley.

MISS HUXLEY
Spell it, please.

BOARD MEMBERS
(AD LIB)
Yes, spell it, etc.

PRESIDENT
'Diphthong'. D-i-p-t-h-o-n-g.

The Board breaks out in spontaneous applause and laughter.

MISS HUXLEY
Congratulations, Mister President.
(to Cory)
Try it again. 'Diphthong'.

CORY
'Diphthong'. D-i-p-H!-t-h-o-n-g.

The Board breaks into laughter and applause again.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - DAY

A few Christmas decorations are evident in the apartment.

Cory studies constantly.

Dwain watches television.

Mom cleans and irons.

Cory's pets look for attention.

The cat rubs against his leg.

The rat scratches at his cage.

He is unaware of them or anything around him.

The world revolves outside of his consciousness.

INT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - DAY - A FEW DAYS LATER

Cory sees Yolanda studying from a wordbook while she eats a sandwich.

She is as engrossed as Cory when he studies.

He goes over and sits down next to her.

After a moment, she realizes that he is there.

YOLANDA

Oh, hi, Cory. Apparently your friend had some influence on the School Board. We're going to have a city-wide spelling bee after all, with the winner going to Washington for the finals. Isn't that great? But I guess you already knew.

CORY

I just found out myself. I see you have the word book. Hard, aren't they?

YOLANDA

Not really, I know a lot of them.

CORY

Wow, I didn't know any of them when I started studying them.

YOLANDA

There are a few tricky ones, but it's all in the game.

CORY

For me the game is sudden death. No overtime.

YOLANDA

I can't even imagine losing. Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to...

CORY

That's all right, I'm used to it.

YOLANDA

Well, anyway, good luck.

CORY

Thanks.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - A FEW DAYS LATER

The students mill about noisily as usual.

Some have open books on their desks.

A few sit quietly.

Cory and Yolanda study.

Shawn slam dunks wads of paper into an imaginary basket.

TEACHER

A little quiet, please, future guardians of democracy.

The class quiets down a little.

TEACHER
(continuing)
Oh, do we have something exciting
planned for you this morning.

The class mocks excitement (AD LIB).

CLASS
Oooh, ahhhh, etc.

TEACHER
A spelling bee!

The class moans and laughs AD LIB.

The Teacher takes a position in the middle of the room
facing the class.

TEACHER
(continuing)
Students on my left, you're
Team A, line up against the
wall. Team B, on the right, up
against the window.

There are more groans as they line up opposite each
other.

TEACHER
(continuing)
Your enthusiasm overwhelms me.

They continue to moan and groan (AD LIB).

TEACHER
(continuing)
Every moment I spend in this
class reaffirms my commitment
to education.

The teacher begins by using rather simple words for
eighth graders.

TEACHER
(continuing)
We'll start with a real toughie
for eighth graders, Team A,
'Eighth'.

There is a titter of laughter.

STUDENT #1
'Eighth', e-i-g-t-h, eighth.

More groans.

TEACHER
Sit down. Team B, 'Eighth'.

STUDENT #2
'Eighth', e-i-g-h-t-h, eighth.

They cheer.

TEACHER
Bravo! Team A, I hope this
next one doesn't embarrass
anyone. 'Embarrass'.

STUDENT #3
'Embarrass', e-m-b-a-r-a-s-s,
embarrass.

TEACHER
Sit down.

More groans, some question the decision.

CLASS
(together, AD LIB)
What's wrong with that? That's
not the way it's spelled?
Sounded right to me.

TEACHER
Team B, 'Embarrass'.

CORY
'Embarrass', e-m-b-a-r-r-a-s-
s, embarrass.

TEACHER
Correct.

More groans and comments.

CLASS
(together, AD LIB)
What's the difference? Sounded
the same to me.

TEACHER
Team A, 'badminton'.

SHAWN
'Badminton', b-a-d-m-i-n-t-i-n,
badminton.

TEACHER
Sit down. Team B.

STUDENT #4
'Badminton', b-a-d-m-i-n-t-o-n,
badminton.

TEACHER
Correct. Team A, 'Tantalize'.

YOLANDA
'Tantalize', t-a-n-t-a-l-i-z-e,
tantalize.

The spelling continues (M.O.S.).

SERIES OF SHOTS BEGINS

- A. Students are eliminated one by one in a series of quick shots.
- B. The eliminated students talk among themselves.
- C. Some read comic books.
- D. Some daydream.
- E. Some doodle.
- F. One files her nails.
- G. One combs her hair.
- H. Few pay any attention to the contest.
- I. Finally, only Yolanda and Cory remain standing.

SERIES OF SHOTS ENDS

TEACHER
Well, Cory and Yolanda, what a surprise. Let's up the ante a little and get tough.

He opens the official word study book.

The class gasps, some in genuine awe and others in mockery.

The battle begins.

TEACHER
(continuing)
Team Yolanda, 'Insurrection'.

YOLANDA
'Insurrection', i-n-s-u-r-r-e-c-t-i-o-n, insurrection.

There is polite applause and acclamation from the class.

The students begin to pay attention.

TEACHER
Team Cory, 'Chivalrous'.

CORY
'Chivalrous', c-h-i-v-a-l-r-o-u-s, chivalrous.

TEACHER
Yolanda, 'Debacle'.

YOLANDA
'Debacle', d-e-b-a-c-l-e, debacle.

The dialogue and action continue (M.O.S.)

The intensity of the competition is reflected in the faces of the two contestants.

The class follows the spelling with open books, listening attentively.

They react with expressions of amazement.

They shake their heads.

They smile.

They applaud and cheer enthusiastically.

TEACHER

Cory, 'Vilify'.

CORY

'Vilify', v-i-l-l-i-f-y, vilify.

TEACHER

Uh, oh. Yolanda, care to try?

YOLANDA

'Vilify', v-i-l-i-fy-, vilify.

TEACHER

Bravissima! Yolanda, you are
the champion.

The class bursts into noisy applause and AD LIB
accolades.

CLASS

Wow! Great! Yay, Yolie. Too
bad, Cory.

Cory hangs his head and sits down.

Shawn pats him on the back.

SHAWN

You did good.

Yolanda luxuriates in the warm glow of recognition.

TEACHER

(to Yolanda)

I wish I had a trophy to give
you, but I assure you, there
will be trophies in your future.
In the meanwhile, I will
inscribe...

Teacher writes "Yolanda is the Eighth Grade Spelling
Champion" on the blackboard.

TEACHER

(continuing)

... your name on the blackboard
in chalk for all the world to
see.

INT. SCHOOL HALL - DAY - MOMENTS LATER

Cory and Shawn are out of the classroom first.

They head for the exit.

Yolanda comes out looking for them.

She sees them and catches up with them.

YOLANDA

I hope I didn't hurt your
feelings, Cory. I couldn't
help it. I'm just a good
speller.

CORY

I understand.

YOLANDA

I hope we can still be friends.

CORY

Sure.

She stops and turns to go the other way.

Cory and Shawn keep on walking.

YOLANDA

(yelling after Cory)
See you.

Cory does not turn around.

CORY

Sure.

EXT. SCHOOLYARD - DAY - LATER

Cory and Shawn walk to the bus.

SHAWN

Those were some tough words, I
could hardly pronounce some of
them, much less spell them.

CORY

Badminton? You missed badminton?
It's a sport!

SHAWN

I don't play badminton. I play
basketball. If I played
badminton, I could have spelled
it. Ask me to spell basketball,
go ahead, ask me.

CORY

Spell 'lacrosse'.

SHAWN

I don't play lacrosse either.

CORY

It's a good thing you can play
basketball.

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - DAY - LATER

Cory enters and throws his book bag on the floor.

MISS HUXLEY

Uh, oh. Bad day in school?

CORY

Is there such a thing as a good
day in school?

MISS HUXLEY

Want to talk about it?

CORY

I lost, that's all. I couldn't
even win that stupid spelling
bee on my class level, how can
I win on a city or national
level?

MISS HUXLEY

You study for it.

CORY

I did study for it.

MISS HUXLEY

You study harder. You study until your eyeballs feel like they're going to pop out of your head and it hurts so much you wish they would. Then you study some more.

CORY

I'm tired of studying.

MISS HUXLEY

Maybe Shawn can get you on his pro basketball team.

CORY

I can't play basketball, you know that.

MISS HUXLEY

I meant as a scorekeeper, or maybe ball boy.

CORY

That's real funny.

MISS HUXLEY

Or maybe you can help Mister Watson deliver newspapers. That would be a lot easier. No studying, no thinking, no challenge, and no disappointments. Just stumble along from one day to the next, going nowhere, still 'here'!

Cory picks up his book bag and runs out of the library.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE APARTMENT - DAY - LATER

On the way home Cory is confronted by Kool and Dwain.

KOOL

Short stuff, my man, staying out of trouble?

CORY

So far.

KOOL

I got some work for you later,
make yourself some lunch money,
if you don't fall asleep on the
job, like last time.

CORY

What's it all about?

KOOL

It's easy, that's all you got
to know for the time being.
Your big brother will fill you
in on the details. I got to go
now.

(to Dwain)

See you later, cool?

DWAIN

Cool, man.

Kool leaves and Cory and Dwain continue the walk home.

CORY

I'm not going to do this again,
and you shouldn't either. You
can go to jail if you're caught.

DWAIN

I'm not going to jail, I'm too
smart. You don't see Kool
getting caught, do you?

CORY

That's what all the smart guys
say, Dwain. There ain't no
smart guys in jail I guess,
only dumb ones.

DWAIN

(laughing)

The only ones I know are dumb.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - DAY - LATER

Mom is pacing the floor furiously as they enter the
kitchen.

She flies into Dwain's face.

MOM

(to Dwain)

You quit school without even telling me, much less asking for my opinion? A neighbor has to tell me? How dare you?

DWAIN

I was going to tell you.

She shows him the money she found on the table earlier.

MOM

And this, where did this come from?

DWAIN

I got a job washing and polishing cars in a small shop across town.

MOM

Is that how you intend to spend your life, washing cars?

DWAIN

It's a start, Mom. It's money.

MOM

I wish you hadn't quit.

DWAIN

You quit school when you were my age.

MOM

I had to. I had a baby to feed.

DWAIN

Oh, now that's my fault, too?

MOM

It's never been a matter of fault. It's simply a matter of fact. I just wish you hadn't quit. It makes everything in life so much harder.

DWAIN

At least I'm working. I can
bring some money into the house.

Mom is relieved, but anxious.

MOM

Please don't do anything foolish.

DWAIN

I won't, Mom.

MOM

Help me put up the Christmas
tree. I can't do it by myself.

She goes out into the hall for a minute.

CORY

(sarcastically, to
Dwain)

I won't, Mom!

DWAIN

Button it up, punk.

Mom returns with a scrawny tree.

MOM

It's modest, but sincere.

DWAIN

I've got to get some sleep,
Mom, I'm on the night shift
tonight.

Dwain goes to bed, leaving Cory to help his mother.

He secures the tree in a stand as she holds it straight
and steadies it.

MOM

How's school, Cory? I hope you
do better than ... well, I don't
know what to expect anymore.

CORY

We had a spelling bee today.

She opens some boxes with lights and ornaments.

MOM

That's what you've been studying for, isn't it? How did you do?

CORY

I made it to the end and missed an easy word.

Cory hangs some lights as Mom puts on the ornaments.

MOM

Making it to the end is important.

CORY

Winning is more important.

MOM

You have to make it to the end first, before you can win anything.

(indicating)

Put a little more tinsel on your side.

(beat)

You can do better, you still have a month to study before the official contest begins.

CORY

That's not much time.

MOM

I'll help you.

CORY

But Mom, you have to get your sleep in the evening before you go to work.

MOM

I'm in this with you heart and soul, son.

They step back from the tree to admire it. She hugs Cory.

MOM

(continuing)

I love this time of year.

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - FOLLOWING DAY

Miss Huxley ignores Cory when he enters.

She is busy with paperwork.

He leans over the counter and waits.

Finally he catches her eye.

CORY

Sorry about that scene the other day. I was very upset.

MISS HUXLEY

So was I. I persuaded the School Board to participate in the All America Spelling Bee and the best speller in the city was going to punk out on me. How do you think I felt about that?

CORY

I'm sorry, I don't like to lose. I've got to win. I've got to.

MISS HUXLEY

You didn't lose. Only losers lose, and you're a winner in my book. So, let's not talk about it anymore.

She offers Cory her hand. They shake on it.

CORY

Miss Huxley, what books would a nursing student use to study from?

MISS HUXLEY

Why?

CORY

I want to borrow some for my mother. I want her to go to college and become a real nurse.

MISS HUXLEY

That's admirable of you, but it does cost money.

CORY

I have a plan.

MISS HUXLEY

I suggest anatomy, biology, chemistry and psychology for starters. It's a long and complicated process, a lot harder than just spelling. Do you think she can do it?

CORY

I'll help her.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - EVENING

Cory is alone, sitting at the kitchen table studying from a rather thick book.

Mom enters carrying some presents.

She has the night off.

MOM

Hi, darlin'. Dwain in bed?

CORY

Hi, Mom. No, he must be working. I haven't seen him.

She hums a holiday favorite as she puts the few presents under their modest little tree.

Then she sits down with Cory.

MOM

What's that you're reading?

CORY

It's a book on pharmacology. I got it from the library. I thought maybe it would help you get a better job at work, maybe get to be a real nurse.

She opens it and to their pleasant surprise, she is familiar with a lot of its substance.

MOM

I know a lot of these medications and what they're used for. But how is it going to get me a better job?

CORY

If you already know this stuff, you could easily pass the course in nursing school.

MOM

Yes, I suppose so, still, the question is, how do I pay for it?

There is a KNOCK at the door. Cory answers.

CORY'S P.O.V. - AT THE DOOR

It is the beat policeman, with a big smile on his face.

POLICEMAN

Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!

MOM (O.S.)

Who is it, Cory?

BACK TO SCENE

CORY

It isn't Santa Claus.

INT. POLICE STATION - HOLDING CELL - NIGHT - LATER

Cory and Mom are at the Police Station.

Dwain is in custody on petit larceny charges.

He sits behind a bullet proof glass partition as he speaks with his mother on a telephone.

Mom is crying.

MOM

You promised me you wouldn't do anything foolish.

DWAIN

I only did it because I wanted to get you a Christmas present.

MOM

Stealing to buy a present?
What kind of a thought is that?
I don't need anything that bad.

INT. POLICE STATION - PROCESSING DESK - NIGHT - LATER

Dwain is released in his mother's custody.

SERGEANT

Since you don't have any prior record, we're letting you out with an appearance ticket, young man. You show up in court as scheduled or you sit in jail until the case is settled. Understand?

DWAIN

Yes, sir.

SERGEANT

And you keep your nose clean. Understand?

DWAIN

Yes, sir.

The Sergeant gives Dwain a brown manila envelope with his wallet and keys.

Dwain checks the contents and signs a receipt.

As they leave, the neighborhood beat policeman taps Cory on the shoulder.

CORY'S P.O.V. - THE POLICEMAN

POLICEMAN

(grinning)
I'm looking out for you.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - NIGHT - LATER

Their mother is furious.

She berates Dwain while Cory feeds his pets.

MOM

You promised me, you lied to me. How do you expect me to trust you when you do a thing like that?

DWAIN

It won't happen again, Mom, I swear.

There is a KNOCK on the door. The Mother goes to answer it.

CORY

(under his breath, to Dwain)

It won't happen again, Mom, I swear!

DWAIN

Button it, punk.

She opens the door. It is Kool.

MOM

What do you want?

KOOL

Good evening, Mrs. Magee, is Dwain home?

MOM

Why?

KOOL

I heard he was in trouble. I try to help my friends in trouble.

MOM

I know you. You're the trouble.

She slaps Kool in the face.

MOM
(continuing)
Now you get out of here and
stay away from my boys, or else
I'll show you what trouble is.

Kool recoils from the blow and rages.

KOOL
Nobody hits me, nobody! Not
even an old lady.

Dwain stays out of the quarrel.

Cory comes to his mother's defense.

CORY
Don't you threaten my mother,
you punk.
(to his pet rat)
Get him, Willard!

He throws his pet rat on Kool.

He screams in terror, brushing off the rat and stumbling
backwards down the stairs.

Cory picks up his rat and kisses it.

CORY
(continuing)
I'm sorry, boy. I hope he didn't
scare you.

Their mother closes the door and wrings her hands in
anguish.

MOM
I have to get us out of here.

SERIES OF SHOTS (M.O.S.)

A. In the library, Cory helps Miss Huxley stack books
on the shelves.

B. He pushes the cart and she shelves the books, asking
words.

C. His lips move in response.

- D. They smile.
- E. They frown.
- F. They laugh.
- G. She shows him the book with the correct spelling.
- H. He nods his head in understanding.
- I. In school, Cory studies from the word book, oblivious to the class and the teacher.
- J. The teacher stops and stares at Cory.
- K. So does the class.
- L. Cory is unaware. He closes his eyes and moves his mouth as he spells the words from memory.
- M. Cory's Mom sits at the kitchen table and asks the words as Cory paces the kitchen and spells, stumbles, and recovers.
- N. Dwain walks through the room on his way in and out, shaking his head.
- O. Mom smiles and gives Cory a big hug.
- P. On the bus, Shawn reads the words to Cory as Cory spells them back.
- Q. Shawn stumbles more in his pronunciation than Cory does in the spelling.
- R. Other kids on the bus as well as adult passengers' faces express amazement and admiration.
- S. Cory sleeps at the kitchen table. It is covered with school books, the word book and an open dictionary.
- T. At work in the hospital, Mom lifts a patient and fluffs up a pillow under her head.
- U. She gives the patient a sip of water.
- V. The patient smiles, lip syncing a 'Thank you, Nurse'.
- W. Mom goes back to mopping up a mess.

X. In the vacant lot, Dwain and Kool confer with their "business associates".

Y. A police car with flashing lights interrupts their activity.

Z. They scatter like rats into the darkness down alleys.

AA. In the school cafeteria, Cory studies as he eats his lunch.

BB. Shawn sits and eats with him but is ignored.

CC. Yolanda can be seen in the background doing the same with her girl friends.

DD. Once in a while she looks over at Cory.

EE. Cory does not look up from the word book.

FF. She regards Cory with cautious respect.

GG. In the school gym, Shawn and others play basketball while Cory studies the word book on the sidelines.

HH. One of the players accidentally loses the ball. It bounces over and hits Cory.

II. He doesn't even realize it and continues spelling to himself.

SERIES OF SHOTS ENDS

INT. SCHOOL HALL - DAY - LATER

YOLANDA

How are you doing, Cory?

CORY

Just fine.

YOLANDA

Too bad runners up can't go to Washington for the All America finals. That way you could come along.

She is serious.

Cory is not amused, but he is intimidated.

YOLANDA

(continuing)

Anyway, I hope we'll still be friends.

CORY

Sure.

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - DAY - LATER

Cory slams books around while helping Miss Huxley restack them.

He is disturbed to distraction.

MISS HUXLEY

What's the problem now?

CORY

I like Yolanda, and she's a good speller. I wish she wasn't, or I wish I didn't like her as much, then it would be easy.

MISS HUXLEY

Easy to what?

CORY

Easy to beat her. I wouldn't care. But I still want to be friends with her even if I win. I know she has her heart set on winning.

MISS HUXLEY

So do you. Only one can go to the city finals from your school, only one can go to Washington from the city. Focus on the prize, Cory. The goal is realistic and within your grasp. Yolanda is intelligent and resourceful. Don't let your feelings interfere.

CORY

But I'm afraid.

MISS HUXLEY
Of losing, or winning?

CORY
I don't know which is worse.

MISS HUXLEY
Don't forget how much your mother
wants you to win. Think about
that.

INT. SCHOOL AUDITORIUM - DAY - A FEW DAYS LATER

The school auditorium is NOISY with students as the
School Spelling Bee is about to get underway.

Parents, teachers and students file into seats.

About forty student contestants, ages thirteen to
sixteen, are seated on the stage. All have signs with
a number hanging from their necks.

Among the contestants sit Cory and Yolanda.

The school PRINCIPAL begins with the official words
from the study book.

MONTAGE OF SCENES FOLLOW (M.O.S)

One by one the spellers rise and walk to the front of
the stage.

The Principal pronounces the word and uses it in a
sentence.

They spell correctly and return to their seats on stage.

They misspell the words and retire backstage.

The bee continues (M.O.S.).

INTERCUT between the participants and the audience
throughout the following shots.

The audience members gasp, smile, frown, cheer and
applaud as the words are spelled.

One by one they are eliminated until only Cory and
Yolanda remain.

Tension intensifies as they handle one difficult word after another.

They bite their lips.

They squeeze their eyes shut in concentration.

They breathe sighs of relief with each correct spelling.

MONTAGE ENDS

PRINCIPAL

(to Yolanda)

Number six, 'Obovoid'. Eggs are necessarily 'Obovoid'.

YOLANDA

'Obovoid', o-b-a-v-o-i-d, obovoid.

PRINCIPAL

No, sorry, number six.

But Cory hasn't won yet; he still must spell the last word correctly.

PRINCIPAL

(continuing; to Cory)

Number three, 'Propinquity'. Propinquity is a determining factor in choosing a mate.

CORY

'Propinquity',
(faltering)

P-r-o-p-

(to the Principal)

Could you pronounce it again, please?

PRINCIPAL

(pronouncing, slowly)

'Pro-pin-qui-ty'.

CORY

P-r-o-p-i-n-q-u-i-t-y,
propinquity.

PRINCIPAL

Correct. Number three, Cory Magee, is the Horace Mann Junior High School champion speller.

The audience stands and applauds.

Cory offers a conciliatory hand of congratulations to Yolanda.

YOLANDA

It doesn't matter. My dad took that job and we'll be moving. I couldn't go to Washington, anyway. But good luck, Cory.

CORY

Thanks...
(beat)
I'll miss you.

YOLANDA

I'll miss you too.

Miss Huxley and Mom join Cory on the stage.

They are elated.

MOM

Oh, I am so proud of you, Cory. I still can't believe those words. How on earth did you do it?

CORY

(modestly)
It was easy.

MISS HUXLEY

Let's not get too wrapped up in ourself. It's not over, only just begun. Now you have to beat the rest of the city, and don't forget... the other city schools get more funding for education and have advanced courses for gifted students. Only one goes to Washington.

MOM
(hugging him)
He can do it. He's my hero.

CORY
I don't know.

MISS HUXLEY
Keep your eyes on the prize.
The five thousand dollars is
important.

CORY
Maybe I was just lucky. Yolanda
is a lot smarter than I am.

MISS HUXLEY
Luck is just a word to describe
the opportunity you make for
yourself by hard work and study.

MOM
It's all within you.

MISS HUXLEY
It always was and always will
be.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - DAY - SATURDAY MORNING

Cory and Dwain are alone. Mom isn't home from work at
the usual time.

Dwain eats a doughnut.

Cory studies his word book.

DWAIN
Apparently, you're not as dumb
as you look, geek boy, but no
matter how smart you get, I'll
always be smarter. Don't forget
it.

CORY
I wonder where Mom is, she's
late.

Mom comes in smiling.

CORY

(continuing)

Hi, Mom, why the big smile?

MOM

I just had a long talk with my Union representative. Our Union contract with the hospital has a tuition refund plan for employees who want to get ahead. If I can get into a nursing program, all I have to do is maintain an average and the hospital will refund the tuition.

CORY

That's great, Mom.

DWAIN

Yeah, that's great. Where are you going to get the money in the first place?

MOM

I don't know; maybe borrow it from a bank. I can go to the bank on Monday. Oh, I'm so excited I don't think I can sleep.

DWAIN

Well, I can. I worked last night, too.

Dwain leaves the room.

CORY

Would you like me to fill the tub, Mom? A nice hot bath might help you relax.

MOM

That's so sweet, darlin', I'd love it.

Cory fills the tub in the bathroom off the kitchen.

While the tub fills, we hear Mom (O.S.) humming a happy tune for the first time.

Cory busies himself studying and feeding his pets.

CORY
Rat, r-a-t. The rat is man's
best friend.

The pets eat undisturbed and unimpressed.

CORY
(continuing)
At least you could applaud.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE APARTMENT - DAY - A FEW DAYS LATER

On the way to the library, Cory stops at a GREEN
GROCER'S produce store.

EXT. GREEN GROCER STORE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

He looks over some flowers.

He picks up a bunch of nice looking roses and waves
them at the grocer.

CORY
How much for these old, wilted
roses?

The grocer grabs them out of his hand.

He looks them over closely.

GREEN GROCER
Old, what old, what wilted?
They're fresh today.

He puts them back in a plastic tub of water.

CORY
They've been here since
Valentine's Day. I've been
watching.

The grocer points to a decorative holiday calendar
hanging by the flower display.

GREEN GROCER

Your girlfriend doesn't have a calendar? You're going to give her for Valentine's day? You're late.

CORY

They're not for a girlfriend... they're for someone special, though...

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out two crumpled one dollar bills.

CORY

(continuing)

... Okay, okay, I only have two dollars I've saved from my lunch money. Can we do business?

GREEN GROCER

I know you. You're a good kid. I'll tell you what. I'll give you a nice bunch for two dollars.

(beat)

Here.

He looks over his stock and picks out a very nice arrangement.

GREEN GROCER

(continuing)

Not roses, but flowers. I have too many anyway. Nobody buys flowers anymore.

Cory pays the grocer.

CORY

Maybe I'll start a trend.

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - DAY - LATER

Cory enters. Miss Huxley is at the counter talking with Tom Watson.

He presents the flowers to Miss Huxley in the presence of Watson.

CORY

For you... for convincing the School Board to participate in the Bee. Without your help, I couldn't have gotten to this point.

MISS HUXLEY

Thank you, Cory... but, I didn't do it all by myself. I had support too, from the publisher of the local newspaper. He's sponsoring the Spelling Bee. Some day you may want to thank him.

WATSON

Bringing my girl flowers? You're making me jealous.

CORY

Your girl? Yeah, sure.

WATSON

Seriously, we're really proud of you, Cory. Winning at a school level is no easy feat. How would you like a job working for me?

CORY

No, thanks. I told you, I don't want to be a newspaper boy.

WATSON

You've got a man sized attitude for a thirteen year old. Just what do you want to do?

CORY

I want to write books, not deliver them.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - A FEW DAYS LATER

For Cory it is study, study, study.

He is consumed to a distraction by his goal.

He constantly studies in class while the action goes on around him.

TEACHER
Cory, what's the answer to the first math problem from last night's homework?

CORY
I don't know. I forgot it.

TEACHER
Forgot the answer, forgot your homework at home, or forgot to do your homework?

CORY
All three.

The class laughs continuously as this dialogue continues.

TEACHER
You're sure your dog didn't eat it?

CORY
I don't have a dog.

SHAWN
(whispering)
Tell him your rat ate it.

TEACHER
Perhaps you should invest in one. Dogs love homework, you know.

CORY
I didn't know that.

TEACHER
It's one of their favorite foods, apparently.

CORY
I'm sorry, I just forgot.

TEACHER

There's more to passing the eighth grade than winning a spelling bee, young man.

The class laughs as the bell RINGS and class is dismissed.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE SCHOOL - DAY - LATER

Cory and Shawn are walking home.

SHAWN

You should have told him your rat ate your homework. You'd be a legend at Horace Mann Junior High.

CORY

(yelling)
I don't want to be a legend, Shawn, I want to win that spelling bee.

The extent of Cory's commitment does not register with Shawn.

SHAWN

Wouldn't it be funny if you went all the way to Washington and won the finals, and flunked the eighth grade?

Shawn swings his book bag and laughs out loud.

Cory is unamused.

CORY

Yeah, hysterical.

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - DAY - LATER

Miss Huxley is testing Cory from the dictionary.

The stress is catching up with him.

MISS HUXLEY

'Jalousie'.

CORY

Jalousie, j-a-l-o-s-y.

MISS HUXLEY

No. 'Cirrhosis'.

CORY

Cirrhosis, c-i-r-r-o-s-i-s.

MISS HUXLEY

No. 'Halcyon'.

CORY

Halcyon, h-a-l-s-i-o-n.

MISS HUXLEY

No, what's the matter with you today? You're not getting anything right.

CORY

I've never heard these words before. They don't mean anything.

MISS HUXLEY

Well then, look them up. Every word in the dictionary is fair game, not just those in the word book. You still have a few weeks before the city-wide bee.

CORY

They're stupid words.

MISS HUXLEY

And this is coming from the boy who wants to be a writer? What kind of books are you going to write? Ones with easy words, only words that you can spell without having to look them up?

She picks up a returned children's book from the cart.

MISS HUXLEY

(continuing)

Oh, here's an easy one.

(MORE)

MISS HUXLEY (cont'd)

(reads)

"Run, Spot, run. See Spot run."

Cory turns red with embarrassment.

MISS HUXLEY

(continuing)

I think you better take that job with Mister Watson delivering newspapers, because that's the best you're ever going to do.

Cory storms out of the library once again.

INT. BANK - LOAN OFFICE - DAY

Cory's Mom sits across the desk from a loan officer.

He shakes his head disapprovingly as he reviews her loan application.

She sits with her hands folded in her lap twisting a handkerchief nervously.

He holds up his hands, lip syncing 'I'm sorry,' (M.O.S.)

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - DAY - LATER

At home Cory finds his mother dejected.

She sits at the table with her head in her hands.

CORY

What's the matter, Mom?

MOM

The bank won't lend me the money because I don't make enough to pay back the loan if I don't get passing grades and the tuition refund.

CORY

(to himself)

Yeah, just when you think you're out of the quicksand....

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - EVENING

Cory studies in front of the television, studying the word book in its flickering light.

He watches as he studies; studies as he watches.

He hums along with the theme MUSIC from the motion picture, "Rocky".

The dialogue from the film does not seem to interfere with his studying.

He stops and looks intently at the TV as we hear Rocky say:

ROCKY (O.S.)

I just want to go the distance
and prove that I'm not just
another bum from the
neighborhood.

Cory is contemplative.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - EVENING - LATER

Mom is getting ready to go to work. The "Rocky" movie is ending as the Eleven o'clock news comes on.

TV ANCHOR (O.S.)

Our lead story tonight is about
the fire bombing of a local
church hall being used as a
drug rehabilitation and anti-
drug education center.

MOM

Oh, my goodness, that's our
church.

Mom sits down next to Cory and watches the TV as the story unfolds.

INSERT - CLOSE-UP OF THE TV

TV ANCHOR

We have with us the Reverend Hawkins, director of the anti-drug program.

(to the Reverend)

Reverend, what are your plans for the future of your program?

HAWKINS

We're not giving up in our war on drugs. These bums can break our windows, but they can't break our spirit.

As the reporter interviews Reverend Hawkins, scenes of the fire are shown.

HAWKINS (O.C.)

(continuing)

We are more resolved now than ever. We know now that we're hurting them. We're hitting them where they feel it most. What we're doing is right. We're going to win this fight. Nothing can stop us.

TV ANCHOR

Thank you, Reverend.

(to audience)

More later as we continue our coverage at the scene.

BACK TO SCENE

MOM

Turn that off. I can't watch it anymore.

Cory turns off the TV.

MOM

(continuing)

What kind of monster could do such a thing?

Cory remains silent.

MOM
(continuing)
Where's Dwain?

CORY
I don't know, Mom. Maybe he's
working late.

Mom puts on her coat and begins to leave for work.

MOM
I'll be home late myself. I'm
going over to the Community
College in the morning to see
about registration and how to
pay the tuition. I have to do
something.

Moments after she leaves, Dwain comes in through the
kitchen window.

He is in a state of panic.

CORY
What's the matter now?
(beat)
Phew! You smell like smoke.

DWAIN
I was trying to put out a fire.

CORY
Since when are you a fireman?

DWAIN
Since tonight, and it's going
to be the last night, too.

CORY
That's interesting. There was
a story on the news about a
fire. Some punks burning down
a church.

Cory turns on the TV.

CORY
(continuing)
Let's see if there's anything
new.

The news about the church fire is being updated by the anchor-person.

INSERT - THE TV NEWSCAST

TV ANCHOR
We have just learned that City
Police have a suspect in
custody...

The TV shows a video of Kool in handcuffs being put in a police car.

TV ANCHOR (O.C.)
(continuing)
... and they are looking for an
accomplice.

BACK TO SCENE

Cory says nothing. He just looks at Dwain, who says nothing.

TV ANCHOR (O.S.)
More arrests are expected.

Cory turns off the television.

There is a KNOCK on the door, followed by a familiar voice.

POLICEMAN (O.S.)
This is the Police, Dwain, open
up.

CORY
(to Dwain)
Better get your toothbrush.

INT. POLICE STATION - PROCESSING DESK - NIGHT - LATER

The police station is very busy.

Detectives are booking various types of hoodlums, male and female.

Cory weaves his way through the human detritus to the Desk Sergeant.

The Sergeant greets him with a supercilious sneer.

SERGEANT

And how can I help you, young
man?

CORY

You have a Dwain Magee here.

CORY'S P.O.V. - DWAIN

Cory can see through a glass partition into an adjacent
room.

Dwain is being fingerprinted and processed.

BACK TO SCENE

CORY

(pointing)
I've come to get him.

SERGEANT

And you are...?

CORY

His brother.
(then hastens to add)
Although I hardly know him,
it's just that we have the same
mother.

SERGEANT

Sounds like an accident.

CORY

Yeah, that's it, an accident.

SERGEANT

Got five big ones?

CORY

I don't have a big anything,
what's five big ones?

SERGEANT

Bail, buddy boy, bail.
(MORE)

SERGEANT (cont'd)
The judge will probably be
looking for five thousand dollars
in bail money.

CORY
Oh boy...
(beat)
How about if you release him in
my custody?

The Sergeant bursts into genuine hysterical laughter.

SERGEANT
(to the other police)
Hey, guys, did you hear that?
The little man here wants us to
release the arsonist into his
custody.

The entire station house bursts into laughter.

SERGEANT
(continuing; referring
to Kool)
Hey, kid, do you want him in
your custody, too?

The Sergeant points at Kool who is also being
fingerprinted in an adjacent room.

CORY'S P.O.V. - KOOL

Kool flashes a big grin and makes a threatening gesture
at Cory, like he has a gun.

He aims it at him and pulls the trigger.

BACK TO SCENE

CORY
No, you can keep him.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - DAY - THE FOLLOWING DAY

Cory studies from his word book at the kitchen table
later that morning as Mom comes home bursting with
enthusiasm.

She is floating on air. She is ecstatic.

She hums a song full of Spring.

MOM

Oh, I feel so good. Things are
finally going our way.

She throws her arms over her head and whirls around
the kitchen.

Cory has never seen her quite like this.

MOM

(continuing)

I had an interview with the
admissions office and I think
I'll be accepted in the nursing
program.

She folds her hands across her chest and renders a
silent prayer.

MOM

(continuing)

They're not even worried about
my high school. Glory,
Hallelujah!

(pause)

Where's Dwain?

CORY

Remember that fire at the church
last night?

MOM

Oh, no....

CORY

Apparently, Dwain was connected
with it somehow...

MOM

Oh, no...

CORY

... I'm not exactly sure how,
maybe it's a mistake. He was
seen at the fire...

MOM

... no, no...

CORY

... but that's because he was
trying to put it out.

Mom collapses on the couch.

She throws her head back and runs her fingers through
her hair, pulling her face taught.

After a moment, she regains her composure.

MOM

I wonder if they'll release him
into my custody again?

CORY

Bail's five thousand dollars,
Mom.

MOM

Oh, Lordy, Lordy... I don't
have that kind of money. Where
are we going to get it? I can
barely make ends meet as it
is... and now Dwain's probably
going to lose his job washing
cars, too.

CORY

(to himself)
Probably.

Mom is in control of her emotions again.

MOM

Well, I guess he'll sit where
he is until the justice process
runs its course.

INT. POLICE STATION - HOLDING CELL - DAY - LATER

Cory is visiting Dwain.

DWAIN

Mom's already been here and brought me the bad news. I guess it's up to you now, little brother.

CORY

What do you mean, up to me?

DWAIN

I need you to win that prize money and get me out of here.

CORY

Forget it! I need that money for college. You should have known better. I'm not supporting your lifestyle. Besides isn't that what dealers are for, to bail their mules out of jail?

DWAIN

Hey, you learn by your mistakes.

CORY

What did you learn?

DWAIN

I learned not to make any mistakes. Next time I won't.

CORY

You just don't get it, do you Dwain?

DWAIN

Get what?

CORY

I used to feel sorry for you. I thought you were just dumb and lazy, but you are fatally stupid.

DWAIN

Hey, man, a little respect.

CORY

Earn it!

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE SCHOOL - DAY - A FEW DAYS LATER

Cory and Shawn are on the way home after school.

They traverse the scenes of urban desolation.

Homes and businesses look like they've been bombed out.

Few are more than shells.

The scene resembles the landscape of an abandoned civilization.

There is a LOUD REPORT, like that of a car backfiring, or gunfire.

The boys instinctively duck and look around to see what happened.

CORY

Is this what I have to look
forward to for the rest of my
life?

He steps aside the dried and frozen carcass of a dead pigeon.

CORY

(continuing)
I've got to get out of here.

SHAWN

Well, at least I can play
basketball.

He kicks the pigeon into the street.

SHAWN

(continuing)
I wish I had an answer for you.

A feral cat leaps from behind a garbage can, grabs the carcass and disappears down an alley.

CORY

I'll know tomorrow. That's the
city spelling championship.

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - EVENING

It is the night before the citywide spelling bee.

Mom is on her way to work.

MOM

If I don't see you in the morning
before you leave, darlin', good
luck.

CORY

Thanks, Mom.

MOM

I don't know how we'll get to
Washington even if you win, I
don't have money like that. I
thought maybe I could use the
money I borrow for college, but
I don't know...

CORY

Don't worry about it, Mom, it
doesn't matter. I'm going to
win anyway.

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - FOLLOWING DAY

MISS HUXLEY

I have good feelings about this,
Cory. You are going to win, I
just know it.

CORY

I feel almost euphoric, e-u-p-h-
o-r-i-c, euphoric.

MISS HUXLEY

You will do it.

She gives him a big hug and Cory is off to the City
finals.

EXT. STREETS THROUGH THE CITY - DAY

On the way to the bus, Cory is accosted by some of the older boys from school.

The bullies who ridicule and jostle him.

OLDER BOY#1
If it ain't the little genius.

OLDER BOY#2
Yeah, the dictionary boy,
Marianne Webster.

One of the bullies takes his word book and throws it to another.

They play "keep away" as Cory tries to get it back.

The bullies just laugh and tease him.

OLDER BOY#1
Want your book back, Marianne?

He holds it over his head.

Cory jumps for it but cannot reach it.

OLDER BOY#1
(continuing)
What's the matter, Shorty, can't
jump?

He throws it to one of the others.

Cory stops playing their game and watches.

Their enthusiasm wanes when they realize the bullying isn't working.

Another holds the book under Cory's nose, but he doesn't go for it.

OLDER BOY#2
What's the matter, Marianne,
out of breath?

Cory stares at them silently.

They're not having fun anymore.
They look stupid just standing there.
The bus pulls up and stops.
The door opens and Cory jumps in.
He yells over his shoulder as the door closes.

CORY
Keep it, you jerks, you might
learn something.

INT. TRAVELING THE CITY BUS - DAY - CONTINUOUS

The bus takes Cory from one end of the city to the other.

He goes from the bombed out inner city where he lives,

CORY'S P.O.V. - THE BUS TRIP

SERIES OF SHOTS

- A. through transitional neighborhoods,
- B. with stores that are actually open and doing business.
- C. He sees increasing economic promise as
- D. he goes through a gray and desolate landscape
- E. to the suburbs
- F. with their ranch homes and garden apartments,
- G. a civilization overflowing with color.

SERIES OF SHOTS ENDS

BACK TO SCENE

The expression on Cory's face is one of awe.
He has never been to this part of the city before.

EXT. JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL - DAY -
ESTABLISHING

The bus approaches the site of the spelling bee.

INT. ON THE CITY BUS - DAY - CONTINUOUS

As the bus slows to a stop, Cory asks the driver,

CORY
Are you sure this is the place?

DRIVER
This is it.

EXT. JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL - DAY -
CONTINUOUS

Cory gets off the bus in front of the school.

The bus drives off, leaving him there.

He is alone in a strange land.

CORY'S P.O.V. - THE SCHOOL

It is a beautiful high school campus.

The school is not enclosed with eight foot chain link
fencing.

The front and sides are meticulously landscaped,
surrounded with grass, trees and decorative shrubbery.

The perimeter streets and sidewalks are free of litter.

There are no abandoned junk cars in sight.

In the rear of the school is a parking lot full of
newer model cars.

BACK TO SCENE

Cory follows the walk into the main building.

INT. JFK SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY - CONTINUOUS

The hall is lined with tables.

CONTESTANTS fill the hall.

Behind the tables are school officials.

Each table has a piece of paper taped to it with the last letters of each contestant's name on it.

Cory goes to the one marked "L to S" and registers.

He is given his hang tag with his name and school on it.

He and the other contestants are directed to the auditorium stage by a MONITOR as they pass through.

MONITOR

Leave your word study books and all other study materials with me before you go in.

CORY

I don't have my word study book.

CONTESTANT

Man, you must be confident.

CORY

I came to spell. Let's spell!

INT. JFK AUDITORIUM - DAY - LATER

The Bee takes place in a large auditorium.

Cory and approximately forty other Contestants sit in chairs on stage and are called one by one in rotation.

As each spells a word correctly, the QUESTIONER goes to the next.

Those who spell a word incorrectly are eliminated.

QUESTIONER

Number 36, 'Stroganoff.' We had beef 'stroganoff' for dinner.

CONTESTANT #36
'Stroganoff,' s-t-r-o-g-g-a-n-o-
f, 'stroganoff'.

QUESTIONER
Wrong.

Contestant Number 36 leaves the stage.

Cory is next in line.

QUESTIONER
(continuing)
Number 37, 'lepidopterist'.
Butterfly collecting is the
hobby of the 'lepidopterist'.

CORY
'Lepidopterist', l-e-p-i-d-o-p-
t-e-r-i-s-t, lepidopterist.

QUESTIONER
Correct. Number 38,
'rotisserie'. Use of a
'rotisserie' guarantees even
cooking.

CONTESTANT #38
'Rotisserie', r-o-t-i-s-s-e-r-
y, 'rotisserie'.

QUESTIONER
Wrong.

Contestant Number 38 leaves the stage.

QUESTIONER
(continuing)
Contestant #39, 'numismatist'.
A 'numismatist' collects money.

MONTAGE

The bee continues (M.O.S.) with a series of INTERCUTS
between the participants and the audience.

Hopeful contestants wince in agony as they spell.

They hang their heads as they are eliminated and leave
the stage.

They breathe deep sighs of relief as they succeed in spelling and return to their seats to await the next round of words.

The members of the audience smile and laugh with the successful spellers.

They shake their heads in sympathy with the disappointed contestants.

They applaud as each contestant is reached in turn.

They emit sighs and gasps as the skill of the students astounds and impresses them.

One by one the contestants are eliminated until only Cory and one other remain.

MONTAGE AND INTERCUTS END

QUESTIONER

(continuing)

Number 37, 'gingivitis'.
Gingivitis is a painful infection
of the mouth.

CORY

'Gingivitis', g-i-n-g-i-v-i-t-i-
s, 'gingivitis'.

QUESTIONER

Correct.

The audience applauds enthusiastically.

QUESTIONER

(continuing)

Number 26. 'Vertebrate'. The
human being is a 'vertebrate'.

CONTESTANT #26

'Vertebrate', v-e-r-t-a-b-r-a-t-
e', 'vertebrate'.

QUESTIONER

Wrong, but congratulations on a
good performance.

The audience shows its appreciation with a long applause for the runner-up.

QUESTIONER

(continuing)

Contestant Number 37 still must spell the last word correctly or Number 26 gets another try.

(to Cory)

'Impenetrable'. The hardness of a coconut shell makes it almost 'impenetrable'.

CORY

'Impenetrable', i-m-p-e-n-e-t-r-a-b-l-e, 'impenetrable'.

QUESTIONER

Correct and congratulations, Cory Magee, an eighth grader from Horace Mann Junior High School. You are the champion speller of the city schools.

The audience stands and applauds.

The runner up joins Cory on stage and congratulates him.

CONTESTANT #26

I heard that your word book was stolen. You can use mine to study for the finals if you want.

CORY

Thanks, but the way it looks I might not be going.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY - LATER

Cory opens a letter and reads it to himself.

INSERT - THE LETTER

That is handwritten, and reads,

DWAIN (V.O.)
Yo, Bro',.... Hope you win the
bee.... Say, maybe you can
help me get my GED while I'm
penned up in here. Not much
else to do.... Then someday I
might be as smart as my little
brother.... Cool, man....
Dwain.

BACK TO SCENE

CORY
(to himself)
Rehabilitation, r-e-h-a-b...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. LIBRARY - MAIN READING ROOM - FOLLOWING DAY

Miss Huxley is smiling as Cory walks in.

CORY
There's good news and bad news.

MISS HUXLEY
First the good news.

CORY
I won.

MISS HUXLEY
And the bad news?

CORY
I wanted to win the prize money,
not for myself, but for my Mom.

MISS HUXLEY
So, what's the bad news?

CORY
We don't have the money to go
to Washington. I don't have a
chance.

MISS HUXLEY

Oh, Cory, the sponsoring newspaper pays the way for both you and your Mom for the whole week.

CORY

What?

MISS HUXLEY

Didn't anyone tell you? I didn't tell you?

CORY

If you did, I forgot.

MISS HUXLEY

It's all free! You won it, and you deserve it.

The neighborhood beat policeman comes in.

Cory sees him and busies himself in the dictionary.

CORY'S P.O.V. - MISS HUXLEY AND THE POLICEMAN

The policeman speaks with Miss Huxley.

He points to Cory as they speak.

She smiles and nods her head.

BACK TO SCENE

Cory pretends he doesn't see them.

The policeman comes over menacingly.

POLICEMAN

My sister tells me that you're going to Washington.

Cory looks back and forth between Miss Huxley and the policeman.

Miss Huxley smiles and nods.

He is surprised and confused.

POLICEMAN

(continuing)

She always said you were a good kid... and she's a good judge of character.

(he smiles)

I'm looking out for you. Good luck.

EXT. WASHINGTON, D.C. - DAY - ESTABLISHING

What follows is a tour of Washington from the air and the ground.

SERIES OF SHOTS

- A. The Capitol Building,
- B. The Lincoln memorial and the
- C. Washington Monument with the
- D. Reflecting pool between them, and
- E. The Jefferson Memorial along the Potomac,
- F. The Pentagon,
- G. The Smithsonian, and
- H. The White House.

SERIES OF SHOTS END

INT. TOUR BUS - DAY - LATER

A HOSTESS boards a busload of KIDS with their ESCORTS.

Cory and his Mom are among them.

HOSTESS

Welcome, contestants and escorts to our Nation's Capitol. We hope you're going to have a week of fun seeing the sights and learning a little bit of history at the same time.

(MORE)

HOSTESS (cont'd)

(pause)

Today and tomorrow, it's
sightseeing.

CORY

(to his Mom)

I hope we get a tour of the
White House.

MOM

Why the White House?

CORY

I'm planning for the future.

MOM

I hope you're not disappointed
if you don't win, darlin'.

CORY

I just want to go the distance.

HOSTESS

Wednesday and Thursday it's the
spelling bee. Friday night
you're all invited to the awards
banquet. Saturday, you go home.
But, remember, no matter what
happens, you're already winners!
Enjoy yourselves.

The busload of kids and escorts applaud.

EXT. WASHINGTON - TRAVELING THE TOUR BUS - DAY -
CONTINUOUS

The kids enjoy sightseeing all the monuments and other
points of interest, the National Archives, the
Smithsonian, the Treasury, the Pentagon, accompanied
by comments (M.O.S.) from the Hostess.

EXT. WASHINGTON - THE WHITE HOUSE - DAY - ESTABLISHING

The bus discharges Cory, his Mom and the others in the
parking lot for a guided tour of the White House.

INT. THE WHITE HOUSE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

The group tours the public area as a TOUR GUIDE provides a narrative. The first stop is the Oval office.

TOUR GUIDE

The Oval Office is where the President transacts the business of the United States. This is where he greets foreign dignitaries and makes the decisions that affect the entire world. President Kennedy's children used to visit their father and play with him here.

The tour continues (M.O.S.) through the Blue Room, the Red Room, the Green Room to Lincoln's Bedroom.

HOSTESS

This is where President Lincoln slept. Some lucky friends of the current President get to sleep here as guests. President Lincoln's son, Tad, used to love to jump on the bed.

CORY

(to Mom)

You never let me jump on the bed.

EXT. WASHINGTON - THE CAPITOL BUILDING - DAY - ESTABLISHING

INT. THE CAPITOL - DAY - CONTINUOUS

The group stands around another TOUR GUIDE in the Capitol Rotunda.

TOUR GUIDE#2

The United States Capitol is the most important architectural symbol of free government in the world. It was burned during the War of 1812 and rebuilt.

(MORE)

TOUR GUIDE#2 (cont'd)
It houses both of the Legislative
branches of government as well
as a rich and extensive
collection of art.

CORY'S P.O.V. - THE ROTUNDA

Cory views the scene as it is described by the Tour
Guide.

TOUR GUIDE#2 (O.S.)
(continuing)
We are standing in the Rotunda,
a circular ceremonial area that
serves as a viewing place for
deceased heads of state and as
a gallery of painting and
sculpture. As you look around
you can see the history of our
country in art.

BACK TO SCENE

TOUR GUIDE#2
We have between three and five
million visitors each year.
That's a lot of people, isn't
it?

The group murmurs (AD LIB) in agreement.

GROUP
Ohhh, aah, ooh, etc.

EXT. WASHINGTON - TRAVELING THE TOUR BUS - DAY -
CONTINUOUS

The group proceeds past the Washington Monument to the
Lincoln Memorial.

EXT. WASHINGTON - THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL - DAY -
CONTINUOUS

The group walks up the long steps to the impressive
sculpture of Lincoln.

Cory and his Mom stand in awe as LINCOLN delivers his Gettysburg Address.

CORY'S P.O.V. - LINCOLN

LINCOLN (V.O.)
Fourscore and seven years ago,
our fathers brought forth upon
this continent a new nation,
conceived in liberty and
dedicated to the proposition
that all men are created equal...

BACK TO SCENE

Cory's Mom hugs him tight.

MONTAGE BEGINS WITH SERIES OF INTERCUTS OF FLASHBACKS
TO EARLIER SCENES

EXT. STREETS THROUGH THE CITY - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Cory and Shawn walk the streets through various scenes
of the inner city decay.

LINCOLN (V.O.)
Now we are engaged in a great
civil war, testing whether that
nation, or any nation...

EXT. SCHOOLYARD - DAY - CONTINUOUS

The schoolyard scene before classes begin.

LINCOLN (V.O.)
... so conceived and so
dedicated,...

INT. TENEMENT KITCHEN - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

On television, the church is engulfed by flames.

LINCOLN (V.O.)
... can long endure.

MONTAGE ENDS

BACK TO SCENE

Cory and his Mom stand mesmerized.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. NATIONAL ARCHIVES - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Another TOUR GUIDE takes the group through the National Archives.

TOUR GUIDE#3

The National Archives house every important document in our nation's history, including the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. Over here, (indicating) under protective, bullet proof glass, is the Constitution.

Cory reads it to himself as the Tour Guide continues (M.O.S.).

CORY

We, the People of the United States,...

A hand taps Cory on the shoulder. He stops reading and turns to see...

CORY'S P.O.V. - YOLANDA

... Yolanda!

YOLANDA

Surprise!

BACK TO SCENE

CORY

Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

Cory startles the entire gathering.

Everyone stops talking and watches the scene between Cory and Yolanda.

YOLANDA

Hi, Cory.

CORY

Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

MOM

Cory, Good Lord, what's the matter?

Cory rubs his eyes in disbelief.

CORY

I'm hallucinating!

MOM

It's only Yolanda.

CORY

Yolanda? Here in Washington?
(to Yolanda)
What are you doing here?

YOLANDA

Well, when I moved, I enrolled in my new school just in time to be eligible for its spelling bee, and since I had done all the studying, I figured, why not? And I won! Isn't that great?

CORY

Yeah, great.
(beat)
Just great!

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HOST HOTEL GRAND BALLROOM - DAY - SECOND DAY OF
THE ALL AMERICA SPELLING BEE

Cory and Yolanda sit on the stage in tiers with approximately one hundred other contestants.

They each have their numbers, their city and their school printed on a 1' by 2' card hanging around their necks.

Escorts and the general public sit in the audience.

The MASTER HOST and PROCTOR of the Bee raps a gavel, calling the crowd to attention.

PROCTOR

Good morning, everyone. We are about to begin the second day of the All America Spelling Bee. The one hundred or so contestants remaining have survived the first day of competition from among an original group of over two hundred.

Proud parents nod acknowledgement and approval with polite applause.

PROCTOR

(continuing)

We remind you all, that each one of these finalists is a winner. All will receive a cash prize at tomorrow night's awards banquet and all their escorts are invited.

(to the contestants)

Ready, everyone?

There is a general fidgeting among the contestants.

PROCTOR

(continuing)

Then let us begin.

MONTAGE BEGINS

The spelling continues (M.O.S.) in a series of INTERCUTS between the audience and the contestants,

With each contestant rising,

Spelling, and either

Sitting back down, or

Retiring backstage for misspelling.

The faces of the escorts mirror the faces of their proteges with relief and disappointment.

Cory and Yolanda are among the ten surviving finalists.

MONTAGE ENDS

PROCTOR

(continuing)

Contestant number ninety-eight.

(Cory stands)

'Terrazzo'. The floor was made of terrazzo tiles.

CORY

'Terrazzo'. T-e-r-r-a-z-o, terrazzo.

PROCTOR

No. Incorrect.

Cory slumps backstage, rips off his hang tag and throws it in the trash.

PROCTOR

(continuing)

Contestant number thirty-two.

(Yolanda stands)

'Heifer' A young female calf is a heifer.

YOLANDA

'Heifer'. H-i-e-f-e-r, heifer.

PROCTOR

No. Incorrect. Contestant one hundred six.

The spelling continues (M.O.S.) as Yolanda joins Cory backstage.

YOLANDA

Too bad, Cory. I was hoping you'd win.

CORY

Thanks. So was I.

YOLANDA

I don't really need the money.
My dad's new job has a great
college savings plan, so I'm
not worried about going to...

(pause)

Oh, I'm sorry...

(beat)

... I always say the wrong
thing... I didn't mean it...
the way it sounded.

CORY

I know. It doesn't matter
anymore. What does any of it
matter anyway? All that work,
for what? I'll never get out
of the 'hood.

Cory's Mom comes backstage and gives him a big consoling
and reassuring hug.

MOM

I am so proud of you.

(to Yolanda)

Both of you.

CORY

I didn't win the five thousand
dollars, Mom. All I get is a
hundred dollars.

MOM

You did your best. That's all
anyone can do is their best.

CORY

I wanted that prize money for
you, so you could go to nursing
school.

MOM

Oh, you are so sweet. But I
might not need it. I found out
that the college has a revolving
loan fund. Any student can get
a tuition loan. Almost no
questions asked.

CORY

Wow!

MOM

You can start your own college savings account. I can take out a loan for my tuition and repay it when the hospital refunds it to me.

(beat)

I only hope I pass all my courses.

CORY

You will. I'll help you. I'll make sure you do your homework.

MOM

I think I can do it.

CORY

I know you can do it, because you're my Mom.

Miss Huxley and Mister Watson appear on the scene.

Cory is surprised and confused.

CORY

(continuing)

Hi. What are you doing here?

MISS HUXLEY

The owner of the paper that sponsored you sent us down to see how you did, and the owner is pretty impressed.

CORY

(looking around)

Where is he?

WATSON

You're looking at him.

CORY

Duh!

WATSON

You know, Cory, I need bright young people in my business in order to grow. There's no free ride, no handout, but plenty of satisfying work. This summer you'll be fourteen. If you want, I'll help you get your working papers. You can start as a copy boy, and yes, maybe deliver some papers and books when we're short of help. If the owner and publisher can do it, a copy boy can.

CORY

Yes, I suppose so.

WATSON

I could also use a sportswriter, someone to cover city school athletics from a teen point of view. Maybe someone really good at basketball. Know anyone?

CORY

I sure do.

WATSON

The paper has a scholarship plan for its employees too. Anyone who qualifies can go to college. Not a bad deal.

CORY

Wow!

WATSON

(offering his hand)
Deal?

CORY

Deal!

They shakes hands.

WATSON

But I warn you, you have to make a commitment to yourself.

(MORE)

WATSON (cont'd)
Nothing in this life comes easy.
The work and study is never
over. There's no finish line.
If you come to work for me,
I'll make you a success whether
you like it or not. I promise.

CORY
I can do it.

INT. TOUR BUS - DAY

The contestants and their escorts are all packed and leaving Washington.

The Hostess waves goodbye to Cory's bus as it pulls away from the Host Hotel.

CORY
I hope we go past the White
House on the way to the airport.

MOM
Why?

CORY
I just want another look at it.

EXT. WASHINGTON - TRAVELING ON THE TOUR BUS - DAY -
CONTINUOUS

The bus passes all the monuments again as it heads along the Potomac River for the airport.

As we pass the White House,

INT. WASHINGTON - THE WHITE HOUSE - DAY - CONTINUOUS

MONTAGE OF FANTASY SHOTS BEGINS

Cory fantasizes:

Sitting behind the desk in the Oval Office, signing bills into law,

Entertaining guests at a formal dinner,
Greeting Heads of State in the Rose Garden,
Leading kids on an Easter Egg hunt on the White House
lawn, and
Jumping on Lincoln's bed.

MONTAGE ENDS

EXT./INT. TOUR BUS - CORY'S WINDOW - DAY - CONTINUOUS

As the bus passes the White House,
We see its reflection in the bus window and through
the window,
There is a big smile on Cory's face as we

FADE OUT:

THE END