

ON THE WATERFRONT

Directed by Elia Kazan
Produced by Sam Spiegel
Distributed by Columbia Pictures
Released in 1954

Growing up in an unenviable environment, his father murdered, left with a brother to Gwallow in a state orphanage, Terry Malloy developed a bitter perspective on life. He formulated a belief that everybody has a racket, that each man is really out for himself. This may be why he resisted the efforts of nuns to teach him when he was younger. It's certainly why he is reluctant to accept the earnest parish priest, Father Barry, who seeks to expose racketeering treachery in the wake of Joey Doyle's death. He was an outspoken dock worker silenced before he could testify, and his sister continues the search for answers, alternately charmed and repulsed by the enigmatic Terry, who plays for keeps because he knows that to show weakness in his neighborhood would be ruinous. He was a fighter, and he still thinks like a fighter, but Edie's inclination that Terry talks tough yet hurts and loves inside proves correct. He is comfortable setting up Joey's fateful meeting on the roof, but once he realizes, outside the bar minutes later, what he has done, his eyes speak volumes, even though he chooses his words carefully amongst his hoodlum-peers. Throughout the film, though he tries to purge his guilt, his conscience weighs on him relentlessly. His task is made no easier by Edie. Falling in love with the sister of the man he set up for the kill is a constant reminder, reinforced by her suspicious questions. He wants to be with her all the time, but he can't have that and ignore his conscience. He tells her, "Edie, I'd like to help, but there's nothing I can do." She, soothingly, simpers that she knows he would help if he could, a response which crushes Terry. He tries to constantly insulate her from the reality of the life he leads, evasively answering the question of what kind of relationship he had with Joey, and what being 'bought' by Johnny Friendly means.

To soothe his guilt, Terry assumes responsibility over the flock of pigeons Joey left behind. He explains to her that, though it is not commonly known, New York City is the home of many hawks, who sit high atop the big hotels and swoop down on the park to seize unwary pigeons. The story's central metaphor is thus established. Back when Terry had convinced Joey to head to the roof, Terry released the bird, representing the soul of Joey, the pigeon-stooge. When young Tommy kills all the pigeons after Terry has testified, he nearly breaks Terry's spirit. The birds have symbolized the dockworkers caged by a corrupt union, and as he contemplates, at Edie's urging, leaving town, putting all this mess behind him, he decides that, if he leaves now, the job won't be finished. Earlier in the film she calls him a "bum." He resents it, but knows she is right, as he admits to Charlie later. Now he is determined to make something of himself.

He had been a great boxer, with a shot of the title in his grasp except for the deal he had made with Johnny Friendly. On his orders, Terry 'fell' in the biggest bout of his life. For honoring the request of his patron, his fighting career was finished, and he sunk away to the docks, kept on as a favor to the indispensable Charlie, but he had nothing left to offer them. To cover his shame, he adopts the mobster mentality, taking from others as they've taken from

him, cocky and arrogant as their emissary, uncertain and fatigued as his own man. Because he and Charlie could never trust anybody, they see the racketeers as their protectors. Sure, everybody is out to get his own piece, but with the union bosses, at least they're united to get their pieces together. Because of this, Charlie considers them friends, and he says stooling means ratting on your friends. This leaves Terry in an uncertain position.

His conscience, and the urgings of the priest and his girl, continue to wear on him, making him realize that there is more to life than himself, that he must give and stop taking. Charlie remains loyal to the racketeers as long as he can. Desperate to stop what they see coming miles away, Johnny Friendly sends Charlie to set Terry straight, threatening Charlie's life, should he happen to fail. Charlie goes on the unenviable mission to protect his brother, hoping to talk him out of it. He never intended to use the gun. It was his last resort. Even though he had always been loyal to his "friends," Charlie cannot turn on his family, so he takes Terry's place as the sacrificial lamb. Johnny Friendly intended Charlie's death to serve as a last warning to Terry, but ironically, Charlie's death galvanizes Terry to action. Considering the lack of sentiment evident in the car, their 'embrace' as Terry lifts his dead brother's body off the wall is all the more heartrending.

Having failed to kill him in the alleyway (the most exciting scene in the film), Terry demands retributive violence. Only at the urgings of Father Barry does he desist. The priest first got involved when he delivered last rights to Joey. Chastised by Edie's scornful rage, he realized that he needed to be out with the people and to bear the burdens of his downtrodden community. He is eager to learn and attracts the support of the dockworkers by his persistence and his fighting spirit. These men are tough and hardened; they want action, not words. The priest gives it to them, being pelted as he speaks on the docks, smoking, drinking, even fighting(!). By offering a spiritual perspective, he is able to make them see that even if they fail in this world, their bravery will be rewarded in the hereafter. Being silent now means a safe life, one racked by disappointment and regret. He is a renegade, and once they are able to trust his intentions, he leads them to a new day.

On one occasion Terry accompanied a hesitant Edie, and here at the end of the film she follows him to the roof when he asked her to stay where she was. At first she was torn because she knew he was a bad boy, but when she found out that he helped kill her brother, her feelings became all the more confused. It's a situation similar to that in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: Juliet stayed with Romeo even after she learned that he had killed her brother because their attraction ran so deep. Inexorably she has been drawn to him, and now her affections overwhelm a sense of the greater goal—exposing her brother's killers.

As he mulls over the dead pigeons, she urges him to go to the country, to move west. We've done our part, let's get on with our lives. But he said earlier in the film that the country made him nervous—"all those crickets." His home is right there, on the waterfront, a hellhole that he is intent on making hospitable for everyone, including, perhaps, the family he plans to start with Edie. Though she wants to protect him, he has to make things right.

One of the reasons that stool-pigeons get a bad name is the immunity from prosecution that goes with their testimony. If the whole lot could go down even without inside testimony, then, for all intents and purposes, the stoolie is saving his own skin and burying his comrades because it's expedient. By going down to the docks, Terry proves he is in the fight not for

himself, but for all the workers. They are reluctant to take him on as their leader because he was one of Johnny's cronies, but his brawl with the racketeer convinces them he has changed— one even remarks, "He fights like he used to." When the scrap gets really heavy, and Johnny finds himself in trouble, he calls on his goons. This after Terry said that Johnny Friendly is tough when he's surrounded by his entourage, but he is nothing on his own.

Terry came down to the docks to work, wearing the same jacket Joey and K.O. Dougan (another dead stoolie) wore. Refused work, he confronted Johnny, leading to the fight. Now, after the fight, his fellow longshoremen stand in solidarity, saying they won't work if Terry won't work. Johnny condescendingly bellows that he can't work because he can't even walk. Thus Father Barry and Edie succor Terry and convince him to walk, because the shippers will take control only if a new leader demonstrates that Johnny Friendly is finished on the docks. The jacket is zipped to his chin and, half dead, he rises and stumbles for glory.

Finally, after a lifetime of sadness, Terry has realized his potential. And by doing right he now knows that, by living for others he is, for the first time, really living for himself.