Are We Ever Really Safe Essay, Research Paper

Are We Ever Really Safe?

Everyone likes to feel safe. We try to protect ourselves and those we love, to make them feel safe as well. The idea conveyed about safety in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” is that there is no such thing.

The narrator of this story had thought that his brother Sonny was safe. Or at least, that was what he had made himself believe. “I told myself that Sonny was wild, but he wasn’t crazy. And he’d always been a good boy, he hadn’t ever turned hard or evil or disrespectful, the way kids can, so quick, so quick, especially in Harlem. I didn’t want to believe that I’d ever see my brother going down, coming to nothing, all that light in his face gone out, in the condition I’d already seen so many others” (48). But Sonny hadn’t been safe from drugs, or the streets, or any of the things his brother had been sure he was immune to. He had been arrested for using and peddling heroin. Sonny’s friend, the boy we meet later, had thought the same thing as Sonny’s brother had. ” ‘I thought Sonny was a smart boy…too smart to get hung’” (49). But they were both wrong.

It had been Sonny’s brother’s responsibility to look out for Sonny from the time Sonny was born. “When he started to walk, he walked from our mother straight to me. I caught him just before he fell when he took the first steps he ever took in this world” (52). The narrator of the story is Sonny’s big brother, so he feels responsible for him. This responsibility is confirmed by their mother on page 55, and the older brother reassures her, “I won’t let nothing happen to Sonny” (57). But he fails at this, Sonny leaves and gets into trouble. Perhaps the narrator felt that if he couldn’t keep his brother safe, then he would protect himself and his family by not contacting Sonny while he was in prison. But he realized that he couldn’t protect his little daughter Grace from dying. That’s when he started writing to his brother. “My trouble made his real,” he said (62). Because the truth is, we are never truly safe from anything. No one and nothing can protect us. This idea is brought out numerous times in the story. Driving past housing projects, where people have attempted to make nice, safe homes for themselves and their children in the midst of Harlem, and noticing the beat-looking grass and the big windows, and the playground, which saw more activity after dark, Sonny’s brother notes: “The hedges will never hold out the streets, and they know it” (53). Sonny’s brother is taking on the attitude he remembers hearing from their father. ” ‘Safe!’ my father grunted, whenever Mama suggested trying to move to a neighbourhood which might be safer for children. ‘Safe, hell! Ain’t no place safe for kids, nor nobody!’” (54).

Sonny wasn’t safe, no matter how much his brother had tried to protect him in his own way, by sending him to live with Isabel and her parents. He still got involved with drugs. The big brother syndrome kicks in again one day when Sonny had gone out. “I was trying to remember everything I’d heard about dope addiction and I couldn’t help watching Sonny for signs. I wasn’t doing it out of malice. I was trying to find out something about my brother. I was dying to hear him tell me he was safe” (54). He was trying to protect his brother, but there was nothing he could do. If he had found drugs in his room, would it have enabled him to really do anything? If he hadn’t, would it have removed all doubt about Sonny’s well-being? Of course not. Sonny wasn’t even safe after he’d been to jail and kicked the habit. As he told his brother, “It can come again” (67). And here’s what Sonny had to say about those who hadn’t fallen into his trap: “But of course you only know the ones that’ve gone to pieces. Some don’t – or at least they haven’t yet and that’s just about all any of us can say” (65). Sonny’s brother was dying to hear him say he was safe. But he couldn’t.

And indeed, suffering, lack of safety, is unavoidable, and also necessary for some things. “When I was downstairs before, on my way here, listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through. It’s repulsive to think you have to suffer that much” (65). But we do. Everyone does. In fact, “There’s no way not to suffer” (65). We are never safe from it.

Total safety is not attainable. Not only in Harlem, but everywhere, there are things that are simply not under our control. Try as we might to block out unpleasant things for those around us, we cannot. This is the feeling that Baldwin creates through the story of Sonny and his brother.

Baldwin, James. “Sonny’s Blues.” The Norton introduction to Fiction. 6th ed. Ed. Jerome Beaty. New York: Norton, 1996. 47-70.