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FICTION | FALL 2021

## No Word

By E. E. Toksu

*Dear Mr. Noah Webster,*

*I was at your New Haven home once; I saw where you compiled the first American Dictionary. Here are some beginnings of letters I've penned, none of which you'll see or are finished, except this first and the last. Please consider the source, someone who is thrashing around in many directions for answers.*

*Sincerely,*

*Chris*

Dear Mr. Webster,

Thank you for learning many languages to put together the first American dictionary. Adding words that weren't in British English like "skunk" and "squash" to your lexicographer's collection was practical on your part. Making other words like "labor" and "color" easier to spell is also much appreciated. I think you missed an opportunity, though, in that there are words missing you may have found along your language studies path.

Dear Mr. Webster,

If you couldn't manage to think of a word to define parents who lose children when even your family lost a child, not to mention the majority of your peers who did, too, how are we supposed to have a chance now when losing one is extremely rare? You learned how many languages to compile your dictionary? Couldn't you have found the one word that would have helped: "Vilomah," a Sanskrit word too, one of the languages you studied that defines us.

Dear Mr. Webster,

I'm sure you wouldn't have done this if you had known the ramifications. That without having a word or even the existence of a category in the new world, at least, for the survivors of this type of senseless loss leaves them unlisted, off the map and non-existent to the rest who remain at the unnerving celebration that is life. You should know from all the maladies from your era, at a time when parents were recommended not to become too close to their children until they were toddling steadily into childhood.

Dear Mr. Webster,

I'm afraid you may be a horse's arse. You didn't find a word for a child who dies young, the counterpart to the parent who lost the child. No word for so many young people who were here but couldn't stay. For the precious and pudgy and precocious littles or the young saplings with beautiful light green leaves with all the promise of far future seasons.

By default, young people who die are thought of and referred to as angels. Mine was much more and much less than an angel. Even at age five, almost a third through his time with us, when his grandmother, pushing him in a swing on a stay in Quebec City, called him "*mon ange*" to imitate the other mothers there, he answered "What's that!?" When she told him the English translation "my angel," he answered in between being pushed into the air and falling back down to her, "Boys aren't angels...well some are, but I'm not."

You spent far too many years on words that don't count, on the ones we don't have or need or use anymore because he's gone. Even if you had put in a portmanteau that blames us, like "childloser," it would have been at least on the record. We give ourselves names anyway if we don't have one: "loser of children," if you prefer. I would have appreciated something like "childloserville" too, since parents who lose children live in that state for some time. Even if they leave during the day, their broken compass brings them back in either case at night. It can't be because your era put dead children into family paintings as if they were still alive and there, is it? Maybe there's something there, but we don't go there in this era where death is taboo, thanks partly to you.

Dear Mr. Webster,

We didn't get the memo not to get close to our young ones or even not be in a hurry to name them because it would be too hard if they were to die. Come to think of it, you should have had a word for that warning in the dictionary since that would have at least opened up the door to having a word for children who die. Maybe we wouldn't be singing to bloated bellies to cross to the little-person- inside-the big-person barrier before we meet.

Dear Mr. Webster,

You had the only control in the face of parents' helpless hell and you frittered it away, as if you might cause it to happen if you named it. Or maybe you were worried parents would be vilified if there were a name for their post-loss selves. Also because you were not a maker-upper of words, you would have had to look even further into Sanskrit than you did. Or to China, where there is a word for parents who lose a child when the parents are elderly, 独, perhaps since that must have been when they really needed their children to take care of them.

"Vilomah" is a Sanskrit word for a parent whose child has died and where "widow" and "widower" come from. Either of these words would have been fine. Grieving parents could have wrapped themselves in the word entirely or jumped recklessly from consonants, over valleys of vowels and to the next steep consonant, or written the label over and over in blank notebooks to address even a pinch of the pain, even though it starts like new again the next

day. It would have given us something to hold onto that we could run around and make ourselves dizzy until sick. Could have been nice just to know it was there and if there were other Vilomahs out there holding onto that word, too. I would have known who my future role models were and perhaps been taken under their wing even before the loss, during his illness, although I probably would have been too scared to admit I would be in their shoes.

Perhaps having a word would have at least stopped people from crossing the street instead of having to speak without words to us. Would have made it so even for a second to those who think they can avoid it in their own lives by avoiding us. Instead of leaving us balancing on one toe on a sharp shard island with no water to swim across. Knowing your child is going to die, down to the year and month from the brainy doctors and waiting for it not to be and then, when he's so sick, for it to be was like being pregnant with a stiller and stiller newborn. I could have earned all seven letters of that Vilomah vernacular by the time his other sneaker dropped.

But I had no label waiting for me to at least tell me who I could possibly be or why I should stay on a planet that let its sweetest spin off. That word could have been at least a swinging suspension bridge over the abyss of who I was and who I would be. Instead I packed up my two-ton brick of sorrow, rage, and guilt, and hit the museum trail to find works of art that looked like me, how I felt. Then I became reacquainted with literary and historical figures who had been in my shoes, starting with The Testament of Mary who gave me permission to destroy the whole world and resurrect it again by pushing past the hardness first.

Dear Mr. Webster,

Not for nothing but since there's no one hard-edged word and only soft and stuffy euphemisms in your word collection in print at least let there be many empty pages in the middle of your book where siblings and parents could draw or press mementoes of their children. Put them into your book like a do-it-themselves kit. We have someone named Martha Stewart who would be all over that. Such a project may help prepare parents too, each time they see those empty pages, if anything can. At least there'd be a place to go in addition to the grave. You engraved in your era that the dead "departed their life" on cemetery headstones. We should also say that nowadays; it gives the sick or the hurt or the murdered more agency, even the sin of human pride before a fall. They walk off stage rather than the curtain coming down first.

*Dear Mr. Webster,*

*I am sorry for your profound loss. There are no words to express my sympathy for your family's loss of your child who is most certainly the most beautiful angel in heaven watching over you.*

*In sympathy,*

*Chris*

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