

(This is a true story.)

Kjære Peter,

Hallo, I'm your cousin Leslie's 19-year-old granddaughter, Baylyn. Since my bestemor had no siblings, you're my closest living Norwegian relative. I didn't know you existed until last summer. My grandma barely spoke about her Norwegian family. All she'd say is I should appreciate my ancestors who immigrated to America. She neglected to tell stories, show me pictures, or even mention many ancestors' names.

When Leslie died in 2022, she left me with nearly no information. My mom and I felt like we were grieving relatives who we'd never even met. We didn't know their names, what they looked like, what their voices sounded like. My mom often says we're "Norwegian orphans" because she's now the oldest American in our bloodline. Our hearts yearn for the people whose souls we feel, but do not know. When we gaze at the Norwegian flag on our porch, those sentiments invade me. There's a hole in my identity because I don't know my family members.

The lack of family history led my mom and I on a several-month-long information hunt. Through many all-nighters, death certificate databases, journeys through graveyards that were missing our family headstones, and endless dead-ends, we were given your name from a cousin we found. We're told you're an artist with a vast portfolio of beautiful artworks and impressive accolades. I wish I could learn what inspired each painting. Looking at the paintings is like talking to you, because art is the visual depiction of the soul. You painted a cozy-looking cottage. Is that your house? I picture us sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee and talking about nothing and everything. I came to St. Olaf College to learn Norwegian, in hopes of gaining the missing family connection. Amidst tragedy, our ancestors made the American Dream- their descendant is now a college student.

I can't describe the feeling of seeing my mom crying reading your email telling us not to contact you again, that you needed no more reminding of the past. The grieving of people we'd never met, the frustration trying to find names, the excitement of discovering you, that you were alive, and the hope we felt sending you the email. Your rejection sank our hearts. We'd missed our family for so long, and we thought the Norwegians missed us, too. I wish you understood that we don't know what happened in the past and didn't mean to stir up old wounds. I know you're hurting, but we're hurting, too. I wish we could mend our broken hearts together.

My generation prioritizes positively changing the world. I am no different. Some want to be astronauts or raise millions for charity, but the change I want to make is to introduce reunion, healing, and forgiveness to our family. I respect your feelings and privacy, but just know that I'm making my first visit to Norway this summer and would love to see you. My hand's extended. All you need to do is grab it.

Hilsen,

Baylyn Shankman