

**THE LETTER**  
by Pauline Topazian  
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**“What’d we get today, Hon?” my husband called, as I stepped into the kitchen from picking up the mail.”**

**“Nothing much,” I replied, “except this – I wonder what this is.”**

**I was holding a very professional looking white business envelope addressed to me. Usually it was my husband who received the professional letters! The sender appeared to be a firm of some sort – perhaps an attorney’s office. A slight shiver went through my body. “Was someone suing me or what?”**

**Unfolding the letter I read, “Our firm traces the heirs to unclaimed estates; we have reason to believe that you are a rightful heir to the estate of John W. Mason, born in Boston, MA in 1905 (it was now 1999). He died without a will leaving an estate of close to one million dollars.”**

**“Was this for real? Who was this unknown relative whose name was unfamiliar?”**

**We puzzled over it. “This must be a scam. Let’s call Jason.” Our son, practicing with a large Boston law firm agreed.**

**“Don’t respond to it”, he advised. “They are baiting you and just want your money.”**

**Mary, our niece, a lawyer in Hartford seconded his words.**

**BUT – the letter clearly stated, “No one agrees to pay us a fee for tracing heirs, but rather we speculate on our ability to locate the proper heirs and make arrangements directly with them on a contingent fee basis. Upon successful conclusion of the case, as may be anticipated, you will receive, NET, a full two-thirds of the sum to which you are entitled; the remaining one-third will be retained by us as reimbursement for our expenses and as compensation for our services. If we are unable to make a successful claim we expect nothing in return.”**

**“What do we have to lose by engaging these people?” we asked each other; “after all we don’t have to send any money.” Still, we hesitated. I spoke with my brother and my nephew who had received the same letter. “Was it possible to trace this matter ourselves? Should I give away one third of the inheritance that was legally mine? So many questions raced through my mind.” But after much angst, I did sign the agreement and mailed it. And then the firm disclosed some interesting facts.**

**Heirs would not be able to trace this decedent on their own. Shortly after he was born, his father died. The mother remarried and her new husband adopted the young boy – thus John King became John Mason. The deceased had no children. He had one half-brother, also childless, who predeceased him. Both parents were only children, meaning he had no aunts, uncles or cousins.**

**“Counsel informs us that in circumstances such as these the descendants of great-grandparents would inherit. It is therefore our belief that you may have an interest in the pending estate of**

**John King as one of the descendants of his paternal great-grandparents.” Four distinct lines of heirs were established: paternal/paternal, paternal/maternal, maternal/paternal and maternal/maternal. “The relatives of each of the four grandparents would be entitled to share one fourth of the estate.”**

**“Fascinating,” we mused. “Two hundred and fifty thousand isn’t as nice as one million, but this is the process!”**

**“Now that we have located you,” the letter continued, “our work is far from finished. To process the matter to conclusion, it will be our responsibility to develop the full family genealogy, prepare an accurate genealogical chart and substantiate relationships by appropriate birth, death and marriage records. Ultimately, the completed project will be presented in court for a judicial determination of heirship.”**

**Wondering how long that would take, we proceeded to wait, discussing the issue with some of my relatives. Arriving by mail months later was the whole genealogical chart. “There were my parents and grandparents, aunts, cousins and siblings – interesting to have regardless of any money. Wait a minute! It looked like my quarter of the family was much more prolific than the others. In fact, one group had ten heirs, another twelve, a third twenty, but ours had forty-four! That’s not fair!”**

**“Just about a year following the original letter I received a check in the amount of five thousand two hundred dollars and three cents – my share of the million dollars.”**