

POED

The Usher Institute

You see my life is in danger. I'm not being dramatic or paranoid. I'm just being realistic. I simply know too much about too many powerful people and things are coming to a head. But that's no reason for me to forget my manners. Please take a seat and make yourself comfortable. I am sincerely sorry for the subterfuge, but when you hear my story, you'll know that it was necessary. I had to pay an orderly to smuggle the letter out as my electronic communications are monitored.

No, really, I'm not being paranoid. The management of the clinic sent a memo to the staff about the personal use of their computers and Internet access. Had I sent an email to you, a journalist of some notoriety, they would have confiscated it — or worse. This is pure self-protection. I am truly in danger. This has been going on for a while, building slowly until some inevitable conflagration. I fear that the time is near.

In preparation for our meeting, I've gone through all the files in these cabinets — hundreds of cases current and past — and in the process I've eliminated all but three as candidates desirous of my immediate demise. They are truly powerful families and each one has a dark secret — a secret known to me in my capacity as the Director of the clinical aspects of this institute.

So, welcome to The Usher Institute for the Study of Criminal Psychopathology. You no doubt know of our research, but you are unlikely to be aware that we house patients for long-term treatment, patients assigned by the courts in closed-door hearings, and with as little public record as possible in this day and age. In some court records we

appear as The Usher Therapeutic Alternative or simply Usher Clinic in others. But you won't see us on any official list of institutions offering psychiatric care to the general public. No, The Usher is an exclusive club. Our patients have committed heinous crimes — crimes that would, under other circumstances, have been front-page news for months — if not years.

You see the principle thing that distinguishes an Usher patient from the run of the mill murderous psychopath is his (or her) family name. These names — names from the society pages, names from business news, names associated with politics and law, names of historic significance to this city and to the country, names from the boards of countless corporations and foundations — are powerful totems. What mere money cannot purchase, these names, and their inherent influence, can and do.

If your nephew, or mine, killed his wife and child, slicing them up and preserving their bodies in the oversized freezer in his suburban garage next to the cherry vanilla ice cream and hot dogs, his arrest and trial would be known to all and you'd be hounded for your insights and abused for having “missed the signs” of his murderous insanity. It would all be public and the public loves those stories. They get turned into television movies and instant true crime electronic books.

But change the family name, replace your perfectly nice name, and the perfectly respectable reputation that goes along with it, slip in one of a small circle of exceptionally influential names and everything changes.

Money blunts the instruments of law — and The Usher houses the evidence. The errant nephew is never seen again. He lives out his days inside this storied mansion, undergoing treatments with our expert staff. There are no records of his

institutionalization. There's no possibility of parole. There is little thought to a cure, as the members of our professional staff are most interested in the study of, and not the treatment of, these hopeless cases of criminal psychopathology.

In exchange for the opportunity to study these extraordinary criminal minds, we are trusted to keep their families' darkest secrets — the very existence of these violent deviants — out of the public record. We are trusted and we return that trust with our complete silence.

That is until very recently. In the last year I've become aware of a change in the temperature of the families outside The Usher walls. It has cooled! It has become obvious that someone no longer trusts me to keep his or her family's most terrible secret. I'll spare you the details of how I came to this conclusion, just know that I have not left the building in more than six months and have spent that time reading and rereading all the patient files in order to ascertain the identity of the family that no longer trusts me and to thwart their plan against me.

I know, I know how this sounds, but it's true. All of it is true, and life inside The Usher will change when you share my story with the outside world. Yes, you can turn on your digital recording device. At this point, I'm happy to go on the record. You may need that recording to deal with the backlash after your article appears.

As I was saying, I haven't left the premises for more than six months. During that time I've reviewed all the files and have concluded that one of the three — these three that I will give to you — are suspect. The family of one of these patients has lost confidence in The Usher code of silence and has determined that I am a security risk. Had this not become apparent, I would have continued as a loyal servant to their family

names, but the seed of doubt has been planted and once it is planted it can do nothing but grow. If they do not trust me — I can no longer trust them. I've concluded that the safest course for me is to tell my story to you and violate The Usher code. It's a preemptive strike. This little bee shall sting the huge monster before he swats me aside and my story is confined to the same blank pages as the official records of The Usher patients.

It wasn't always like this. I enjoyed an extraordinary level of trust and my work here was very satisfying. The place itself, the building and its history, are captivating. I was very happy to be employed here. See that sideboard. The mother of one of the inmates knew I admired Art Deco and that I coveted a cabinet in which to keep the coffee set we are using right now. She sent me this beautiful hand-carved piece in cherry oak — not an original, but an almost perfect reproduction. It's lovely.

One of the families in question was so impressed with my depth of compassion for their disturbed son, that they sent me a signed copy of the edition of *The Raven* illustrated by the great painter Edward Manet. It is quite wonderful. I keep it in my private room, along with a print of Magritte's "Gasper the Night Watcher," depicting a black bird looking out a window into the night sky.

Since my self-imposed imprisonment, I have spent a great deal of time contemplating that sorry bird — not that I have been bored. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Usher is a fascinating place with a storied past.

It began as a mansion, built by a sea captain for his bride. But she died on her ocean passage, ending their marriage before it had really begun. He confined himself to a suite of rooms on the ground floor, turning the rest of the space into a warehouse for goods that came into New York Harbor. Subsequent owners turned it into a hotel for

seaman, a brothel, a school for young ladies, a home for unwed mothers, and ultimately a hospital — before The Usher Foundation picked it up for a song in the early 1960s. That was a wild time in the city. Now, since the city built a new Christopher Street Pier, I can sit on summer nights and watch the world stroll by.

But it is not summer now and the streets and the river are grey and cold. I walk the halls and it is difficult not to imagine the shadows of The Usher's past inhabitants mixing and mingling with the staff and current patients. The mournful thoughts of lonely sailors, the perfume of desperate whores, the whispers of shy young ladies, the hopeful prayers of consumptives, the suicidal dreams of the despondent sea captain — all provide the background music for our current patients.

To say they are sick diminishes the absolute horror of what they have done. These are the most unusual of characters. Mental illness rarely produces violence at all — let alone on this extraordinary scale, but on occasion it does. And The Usher was created to house and study the “outliers” of this population — those too inhuman to be reclaimed and those too beyond reason to save, provided their families are sufficiently powerful and wealthy to keep them out of the criminal justice system where they would surely be severely and publicly punished.

It's Only the Wind

I see you heard that. Don't be alarmed. That moaning sound — it's only the wind coming off the river. Some nights it sounds like a wolf howling at the moon and other times, it's a quiet growl.

There are so many sounds here. The floors creak and, once in a while, a strange summer wind will make its way down the backstairs. It's like a cyclone, almost powerful enough to lift a grown man off his feet. Some of the staff talk about it. They scare their new colleagues with tales of flying UP the staircase.

Yes, even a place as serious as The Usher, has its lighter side.

Wilson, William III: File No. 2009-3431

So, let's get down to business shall we? I will begin with a case that may cause you some surprise. You must recall the name Fortunato. Just a few weeks ago I read a story in one of your employer's tabloids, speculating that the investment consultant who bilked millions from unsuspecting, if guileless, investors and greedy money managers, was enjoying life in a Caribbean paradise. It is not so. He is dead and buried, but I am getting ahead of myself.

Fortunato was a very clever thief. His exclusive fund was little more than a Ponzi scheme on a grand scale, but he was socially adept and skilled at promoting the notion of a rare opportunity to make millions. My patient, William Wilson III — yes, THAT William Wilson, the grandson of the inventor and son of the banker, the one who is said to have discovered God and lives with Buddhist monks in Tibet, was one of his principle victims.

Shall we say that being the son of a highly successful man is both a privilege and a challenge? On the one hand, doors are open and seemingly anything is possible. There is never a question about having the money to pursue an education or to travel — but this limitlessness has a downside, too. There are expectations. While William, the first,

demonstrated a keen scientific mind and the business acumen needed to patent his now omnipresent inventions, his son's brilliance has been in turning that initial fortune into great wealth. He then married an equally wealthy woman and produced three children and four charitable foundations. Of the seven, all four foundations and two of the children are resounding success stories. The sole "failure" in the lot is William III.

He was restless from the start and anxious, very anxious, to meet or exceed his father's and grandfather's great success at something — anything. But he failed over and over again. He dropped out of medical school during the first semester; finished a law degree at a second rate school only to fail to pass the bar exam; he opened a chic restaurant in the Manhattan Meat Packing district, filled it with models, actresses and journalists, but it failed to turn a profit and he closed it in a year. There were other enterprises too — too many to mention. His rapid-fire adventures in the business of business garnered him a wide circle of wealthy friends, extravagant tastes and a deep knowledge of vintage wines.

This last item brought him to the attention of Fortunato — another connoisseur with a fabled cellar. By this time, Fortunato was the wonder of Wall Street. He befriended William and, in the guise of a great personal and professional favor, set William up as an agent for his investment fund. William received a handsome commission for selling the coveted shares in Fortunato's fund. He was finally able to say to his family that he was a success.

Of course you see where this is going. Hindsight being the best pair of glasses when it comes to the stock market, but there's more to it. The association between the two men gave Fortunato unprecedented access to the Wilson family and their wealthy

friends. These were people in no need of a quick return. With William III's help, the Wilson family viewed Fortunato's fund as a reliable, long-term investment. Millions flowed through William III's hands into Fortunato's Ponzi scheme, keeping the fund's paper returns at a steady 10 to 12 percent return regardless of the market's drops, dips and incremental climbs.

While Fortunato was hailed as a financial genius on Wall Street, young William was the pride of his family. As I said before, he was not a careful or intellectually deep young man, but he was maturing and he was educated, so he began to look deeper into the fund that was the basis for his new success. A full six months before the rest of Wall Street, he discovered the truth about Fortunato.

He began, in small increments, to move money out of the fund. First his mother's account, then his sister's, then his own... slowly, slowly... shifting the money to more reputable investments. His sister commented that her returns were down, but William tried to quell her fears. He knew that he had to maintain the façade of confidence while slowly, slowly diminishing his family's vulnerability to the crash that would inevitably come.

Fortunato called him on this. At first the older man simply teased the younger about his family's new cautioned approach to investing, but William was not, as I said before, a skilled businessman. He confronted Fortunato who laughed and reminded William that he was fiscally and criminally liable too. William fumed, and Fortunato, known for his great charm and wit, angled to give his young representative a larger piece of the fraudulent pie and offered advice on havens for the money — and escape routes before the inevitable end of the scheme.

It is my understanding that Fortunato believed he had succeeded in convincing William. But for once, he misunderstood. What Fortunato read as greed, was really William's calm before the storm of rage. William had so much more to lose than mere money. He knew that, when the truth came out, he would lose his family's respect and admiration. He would be a failure on a grand scale and that was his greatest fear. He could not, would not, become the William Wilson who ruined the name.

William invited Fortunato to a wine tasting. William had acquired, at great expense, a bottle of sherry said to be from the cellar of President Jefferson. Yes, yes, I know there were scandals a few years ago about frauds using old bottles and noted experts were involved in the scams, but William knew that Fortunato could not resist the possibility — however remote — of tasting such a vintage.

Other wine experts were invited too, but their invitations were for eight o'clock, Fortunato was invited for seven. It was the Thursday night before a holiday weekend and early that day there had been whispers on Wall Street that Fortunato's returns would dip slightly below his all-but-guaranteed range. Even at 9 or 9.5 percent it was still far ahead of the market in general that quarter, the rumor only encouraged more investors to clamor for the exclusive shares. Fortunato was, no doubt, in the mood for a celebration. His Ponzi scheme had reached outrageous proportions and outlasted any remotely similar enterprise in financial history.

I imagine that he packed and unpacked his bags many times, but that is fanciful conjecture — a projection based on my limited knowledge of the facts. William insists that Fortunato always had the bulk of his personal fortune off shore and that his private jet was always ready for a quick departure. This was confirmed by the police and is said

to be the one piece of solid evidence supporting the “hiding in paradise” theory. But I digress....

William invited Fortunato to walk inside his wine cellar. The cellar was large and there was a small table and two comfortable chairs for intimate tastings. The lights were dim and the forest of wine racks would have made it a most inviting place for a serious wine connoisseur. Fortunato had been there before and, I imagine, that the con artist was dismayed that there was only one bottle in the cellar this time. All the racks were empty. The bottles for the evening’s tasting were laid out in the dining room above and the others were gone.

William had sold his most expensive wines, to cover the losses of his best clients, and gave the others to friends as gestures against the time, an all-too-soon and certain future, when the truth about the investment fund would come out. He knew that no amount of sweet gestures would forestall the inevitable tumbling of the financial pyramid — and with it his social standing and reputation — but he wanted to have one last hurrah as a man of honor and good will.

The one bottle in the cellar was the “Jefferson sherry” — an Amontillado with a deep color and a rich, honey aroma. Historic or not, the sherry was superb. As William tells it, (in his rational moments) he opened the bottle and poured out a glass of the amber liquor for Fortunato. He watched the swindler swirl and sniff, raising the glass to his lips with a smile. It was only then, that William stepped back, slipping out of the cellar and shutting the man inside. Through the all-but soundproofed door, William listened to the desperate cries of the other man, the pounding on the door, the begging and pleading and the wail of ultimate despair.