

MANUSCRIPTS

ELABORATION

Brian Szurgot

Somebody else is the Sycamore.
I am the whispered wind rumors
 of treetop gossip.
Mine are vein switchyards
 that thin and stretch.
I am the songbird's hopeshout.

Ice-fingered limbs condescend
 to my burden of snow.

I am the mottled flecking
 of multicolored camouflage bark.
Mine are the worm tunnels
 in the softest skinwood.
I am the crackle of dessicated leaves.
Yet someone else is the Sycamore.

THE ELLINGTON EMERALD

Marta Phillips

Rodney Smythston had never understood his brother when he was alive. He wasn't sure he understood him now that he was dead.

Ralph hated Rodney. Everyone who knew the Smythstons knew that. Now Ralph had died and left his only valuable possession, the Ellington Emerald, to his despised sibling. He had inherited it from Grandfather Ellington, his mother's father, who stipulated the jewel be given to the first born Smythston son. It was the *only* thing of Ralph's that Rodney had ever wanted. Now it was his and he was damn glad about it.

"I don't know why you're so surprised, Diana," Rodney said to his fiancée as they walked out of the lawyer's office. "I know Ralph hated me, but who else could he have left that emerald to? Mom and Dad have enough stones to rival the Crown Jewels and—"

"I *know* all that, Rodney," she interrupted. "But Ralph never did anything nice for anyone . . . especially you!" Diana paused and looked up at him, widening her great green eyes. "What are you going to do with the emerald, now that you've got it?"

Rodney flashed his gorgeous smile. "The first thing I'm going to do is give it to my favorite lady to wear in her modeling show tonight. How would you like that?"

Diana stopped and threw her arms around him, squealing with delight. "Oh Rodney, thank you so much! How did you know I wanted to wear it tonight? It will match my gown perfectly!"

Rodney kissed the top of her honey-blond head and smiled to himself. He could easily read her mind. That was one of the reasons he loved her so much.

The Ellington Emerald was an infamous jewel. It had come into the family in the early 1700s, when they still resided in England. Sir Richard Ellington, a sea captain by trade, had received the stone as a present from some obscure Oriental ruler in appreciation for the trade he brought to the little country. Ellington was all too happy to accept the emerald, being a man who coveted riches. The story went, however, that from the minute he received the stone, his prior good fortune ran out. On the trip home, his ships ran into a great storm which destroyed two of them and mangled the other three. The former fleet limped home, where Ellington found that his wife had run off with another man. She had been the practical one of the family and Ellington died six months later in despair and poverty. The emerald passed on to his scoundrel son, whose wife had the good sense not to let him gamble it away. From then on, the jewel seemed to be handed down to the black sheep of the family, until Rodney's grandfather decided to simply give it to the first born son of his only child, Helen.

That night Rodney sat in the spacious parlor of his family's mansion, getting ready to read Ralph's note to him. Diana had taken the stone to wear in a modeling show for a big department store. He turned the envelope over and over in his hands, finally ripping it open and read:

Rodney,

Well you fiend, you finally got what you wanted. I suppose you were only a little surprised when the lawyer read that the Ellington went to you. You probably thought, "Well, I deserve it." For once, I agree with you, because that stone has brought me nothing but bad luck since the day I got it. I'm giving it to you in the hope that it will do the same for you. If you recall, it was after Grandfather's death that everything awful happened to me—AFTER I HAD THE EMERALD. I ran out of ideas for my book, I started taking speed to get my head going, I lost Marcia because of the drugs and I started shooting heroin. So here I am, at 27. I know you think I am crazy for saying these things but you wait. I know the stone will get to you too.

See you in hell.

R.

"You never stopped being jealous, did you?" Rodney thought.

If it wasn't his good looks, Ralph was jealous of the women, or the way he ate roast beef and mashed potatoes, for God's sake. He picked up the phone angrily as it rang.

"Hello."

"Hi, Rodney? This is Tony Claton."

Diana's agent. "Yeah Tony, what's up?"

"Look, do you know where Diana is?"

"You mean she's not there yet?"

"No."

"Oh Christ, Tony, I can't believe she got lost. You gave her good directions didn't you?"

"Well, sure. I know how she is about finding her way around."

"She'll probably call me soon if she's lost. When does the show start?"

"In about fifteen minutes."

"Oh I'm sure she'll get there. But we better get off the line in case she tries to call me."

"Yeah, you're right. Talk to you later."

"Goodbye."

The doorbell rang as he hung up the phone. As he heard the maid shuffle out to answer the door, he went to the window and peered out. A police car sat in the driveway.

"What the hell. . .," he murmured to himself. A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

"Come in," he called.

Old wrinkled Katie opened the door. In a frightened voice she said, "Mr. Rodney, there's a policeman here who wants to speak with you."

Puzzled and curious, Rodney stepped into the foyer, giving the cop his hand to shake. He was mid-30s and bulging and looked like a red-neck.

"Good evening, sir. How can I help you?"

"Is this yours, Mr. Smythston?" He held out a black case. Rodney took it and opened it, and the green emerald sparkled in the chandelier's light.

"Yes, this is mine. But I don't understand. I gave it to my fiancée, Diana Sutton, earlier tonight."

"What kind of car does Miss Sutton drive?"

"A little Datsun." Rodney began to realize . . . "Has something happened to Diana?"

The cop paused. "We'll need you to positively identify the wreckage."

"Is she alright?"

"Mr. Smythston, Miss Sutton was killed tonight. A drunk driver hit her car."

Two weeks later in his study, Rodney sat at his large mahogany desk, staring out the window. There was a sharp tap on the door and his mother floated in without waiting for a response.

"Oh Rodney *darling*, I know you're distraught but please try not to look so pensive. I can't *bear* it. I know it's been *awful* with Ralph and Diana both gone . . ." She paused to dab her eyes with a white hanky . . . "but we simply *must* go on, dear." She plopped herself in a brown velvet chair, having regained her composure. "Now what are you going to *do* with yourself while your Father and I are gone?"

Rodney looked at his mother in amazement. How could such a beautiful thing be so insensitive? Dark hair swept dramatically up on her head, bright blue eyes, a lovely face and well-kept figure . . . oh, his Mother wasn't so hard to figure out. She cared about *things*, not people.

Rodney watched her through the same blue eyes.

"Oh, I have plenty to do when Dad's gone, Mother. So don't worry about me."

"But darling, you *can't* work *all* the time. There were plenty of girls before Diana, why don't you call one of them and go out?"

Sometimes she did not know what she was saying. He wanted to slap her but instead changed the subject.

"We'll see. When are you and Father leaving?"

"Oh, in a few minutes. I came in here to ask you something, what was it? Oh yes dear, may I take the emerald with me?"

She looked at him like a little girl asking for a piece of candy.

"Of course Mother. I'll get it for you."

"Thank you, dearest."

His parents had flown off in the private plane on a business trip, so he and Katie were alone in the house. Rodney worked furiously until midnight on some backed-up paperwork. Content, he rose to pour himself a drink and was surprised to realize he hadn't thought of Diana for at least an hour. He glanced at his watch, wondering why his parents hadn't called to notify him of their safe arrival: A Smythston tradition. He stretched his lean torso as he walked to the stereo and flicked on the radio.

"... have found the wreckage of a twin engine plane believed to belong to Mr. and Mrs. Phillip R. Smythston of Smythston, Inc.," the announcer's voice droned.

Rodney's mind went blank.

Now everything was his. The company, the house, the cars, the investments . . . and the emerald. A week later, he told the bank to keep the emerald and put it in a safety deposit box. But he didn't care if it was safe or not. He laughed bitterly to himself when he remembered how he had thought Ralph was crazy. Now he was the one who was crazy and Ralph was dead like the rest of them. Lucky Ralph. He was one up on Rodney now.

He would have been fine, but the emerald kept haunting him. He thought of it sitting in the box in the vault of the bank, twinkling even in the dark. Finally, he made arrangements for the jewel to be donated to a far-off museum. But after it was sent off, he felt as though it was closer to him than ever. He could neither sleep nor work from the thought. He went to the doctor and got some tranquilizers, but vetoed the doctor's suggestion he see a psychologist. Not wanting to let the company suffer from his malady, he let the other top executives take over most of his work, spending the days on the golf course or at the stables. He avoided staying at the house, for then the strange feeling of being close to the emerald seemed to increase.

Nightmares plagued him: he tried to run away from the jewel but it kept following him. He would wake up exhausted, as though he had been rushing down corridors, glancing furtively behind him.

One night alone with Katie, his work, and the continuous presence of the jewel, Rodney lit a tall, antique candelabra and started down the hall to Ralph's room. As he neared the room, the horrible feeling he had been carrying with him for weeks grew stronger, threatening to knock him over. The candlelights quivered violently against the darkness. He stood with his hand on the knob for a few moments, then quickly flung the door open, desiring to get rid of the haunting. The room was arranged just as Ralph had left it, stacks of books and papers piled everywhere. The presence of the jewel practically suffocated him now and he strode to a window, placed the candelabra on a nearby table and threw the window open. The cool night air rushed in and Rodney stuck his head out the window to take a whiff of it. Regaining his control, he turned to face the room. Where was it? It was in here, he knew it now, he knew it. He had to find it. He opened drawers and overturned them, spilling the contents on the floor, pawing through it and going on. He stripped the bed and ran his hands over the mattress. Nothing, nothing! Where was it? A strong breeze blew in the room, drying the sweat running down Rodney's face and pushing the curtains into the dancing candlelight. A flame shot up the curtain and onto the wall but Rodney did not notice as he glanced around the room and saw the painting above the mantel. It was a small portrait of his Grandfather Ellington. The wall safe! That must be it. He grabbed the chair from the desk, climbed up on it and threw the painting on the floor, turning the safe's dial before he even had a chance to remember the combination. The flames crackled behind him as he dialed 47, 23 . . . what was the the last number? The fire had shot down the curtain to the junk piled on the floor, igniting it quickly. Perhaps the number was 14; he tried it . . . no, that didn't work . . . 41! Yes, that was it! He turned the combination again and finally the safe's door popped open, revealing the familiar black case. He ripped the jewel from the case and, screaming with delight, turned and threw the emerald into the flames around him. As it fell into the fire, the heat jumped up and enveloped him, too.