

# SAPPHIRES & EMERALDS

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THIS WAS MY FIRST DAY AT THIS RITZY SCHOOL.

Each room was themed and elaborately decorated. Adorned with MacBooks, iPads, and Mac desktops. Oh! They had plenty of money and even had an active and involved PTA, who supplied the teacher's lounge with sweets, silverware, hot chocolate and coffee. This was the kind of school I would have loved to attend as a child because it was beautiful. One of the fanciest elementary schools I had ever seen. It was like a scene from a school on the Disney Channel. This school was the opposite of the public schools I attended in inner city South Memphis. On my walk to the office I completed my routine scan of the students and staff to see if anyone else looked like me and instantly realized they didn't. I became a little nervous. I checked in to the office, got signed in for the day, roamed through the halls and headed up the stairs and around the corner, finally stopping at my room for the day. From what I could see, and my four eyes were looking hard, there was no other Black Teacher or Staff in the entire building and not too many Black or even biracial students. This was a situation I had encountered numerous times in this little pocket of Ohio. On this day I was a 5th grade intervention specialist, my specialty was reading. The perfect assignment for the little avid reader in me. I was expecting three-to-four students in the first period hour. However, I learned that this was a semi optional check in session and I would get them all after their first period classes. I sat at my desk anxiously and excitedly waiting for my first students of the day.

To my surprise I walked a little Black girl. She had hair not too different from my own, and a lot of it. It was thrown together in unkempt pigtails. The poor girl's hair was so matted that there wasn't even a visible part to divide the left from the right ponytail. I didn't even have a comb on hand because I was running behind when I woke up that morning and left my fro pick at home. Who knows the last time that baby's matted head had seen a comb. She had a caramel complexion, tall and lanky, just skin and bones and extremely tall for a 5th grader. She had glasses with lenses as thick as mine with a purple square frame. She wore Sketchers that looked like Converse and a jacket that should have been replaced three Christmases ago. When she saw me her eyes immediately connected to mine, her face lit up, and just like that I knew we were about to have a wonderful day! Yet, I couldn't help but wonder about her story? What is she doing at this school where no one else looks like her and all the other students were from a higher socioeconomic class? But what was I doing there.... working ....

and she was.... learning. Although we had years and life experiences between us, our skin and our natural hair united us and at the end of the day we were just two little Black girls, hustling our way to the top, while navigating through white spaces.

I introduced myself, "Good morning, I'm Ms. DG, your sub for today". Elated, she immediately bombarded me with questions. She was eager to learn my real name, I divulged, "De'Garrica, but most people have a hard time pronouncing it and I don't like explaining so I just go by DG." She told me that she thought my name was beautiful and unique. She was quickly becoming my favorite. She told me her name was Emerald and my heart skipped a beat! She informed me that there were three boys in our morning session and that they didn't usually come until after first period. It was only the two of us during this session. The regular teacher left a reading assignment intended to be a simple small group reading, which subsequently turned into one on one because the group didn't come.

We began reading. She did have some struggles, but was very good at taking her time and sounding words out phonetically. We got about two pages into the book when her curiosity took over. She stared up at me, her thick lenses looking through my thick lenses and she started, "De'Garrica I want to ask you something", and so it began. "What's up?" "Why come every boy I meet asks me if all Black people are rude?" (by boy she meant white boy) "Should I be friends with him?" Well this immediately pissed off the big sister in me. I had to get my thoughts together quick, In the words of Jay-Z, I had to give this baby a "million dollars worth of game for \$9.99", but in a school and kid appropriate way.

I started out with what my parents always told me "NO BOYS!"

"First of all, you are too young to be trying to date, enjoy being a kid, leave

that for when you are older and have the brain capability to do that. Second my dear Emerald, You are 'KIND, SMART, AND IMPORTANT', and you don't want to be friends with someone that is ignorant. It is not your job to defend your race or your culture to foolish boys or anyone, you don't want to be friends with someone like that. A friend would KNOW BETTER! A friend would not approach you with stereotypes. Do you understand what a stereotype is?" Yes, she did, she even told me that she had real friends, friends that got angry when boys said that to her, friends that told her the same things I did, to stay away from boys like that. I told her that if someone wanted to be her friend they would always treat her with respect and see her for who she really is. Yes, she is a Black girl, but she is also a person; a kind, funny, intelligent young woman, and anybody who wasn't for her was against her and people who fell into the against category, could either get with it or get lost.

"You are in school to learn, you have to work harder to get the level you need to be at and boys right now are a distraction, one that you don't have time, energy, or patience for anyway. And a friend, a good friend is hard to come by, but when you find one you will know because they will always have your back and you will want to have theirs."

When our little talk was over, we got back to reading, because we must learn to love reading. I gave my new found little sister a big hug and I thanked the Lord that we crossed paths. I hope when we meet again she will tell me that she has made more friends that treat her nicely, instead of chasing after boys that don't understand her and are little racists in the making. Most importantly I hope she moves out of reading intervention and more into self-love.

