

Good Read

Tracee and Me

GOT A CELEBRITY TWIN? SO DOES BRIDGETT M. DAVIS, WHO SPENT TWO DECADES LEARNING TO LIVE WITH HER DOPPELGÄNGER.



PROP STYLING BY MEGAN KANTOS



The author (left) and the actress Tracee Ellis Ross (right).

ON A WINTRY DAY SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I lay dozing on my sofa when, pulled from my nap by the blaring television, I awoke to myself on the news. Startled, I sat up and wondered out loud: “What am I doing on TV?”

But it wasn’t me. It was Tracee Ellis Ross, standing beside her famous mother, Diana Ross.

You could say that was the moment I really woke up.

Ever since the hit TV comedy *Girlfriends* premiered on UPN back in 2000, people have told me I resemble Tracee Ellis Ross, who played the starring role. When I first saw the show, I took one look at Joan, Ross’s character, and announced: “I do not look like her.” My husband agreed. “You have totally different eyes,” he assured me.

But for the next eight years, the show aired weekly, a runaway hit. And throughout that time, college students, strangers on elevators, waitresses in restaurants, bouncers who checked my driver’s license, cashiers at Whole Foods, and fans at a Meshell Ndegeocello concert all asked the same question: “Has anyone ever told you who you look just like?” Folks stared at me when I was on a subway train or walking down the street. A guy followed me into a Banana Republic dressing room for an autograph, the security guard at my son’s after-school program resorted to calling me Joan, and a woman I actually *knew* didn’t speak to me because she was too nervous and thought I was “that actress on TV.” One day an older black guy turned to me at the doughnut cart where we were both buying

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coffee and said, “Baby, you do know you look like Diana Ross’s daughter?” I yelled at him, “Well, I’m not her! She’s taller, richer, and better dressed!” He just chuckled.

Yes, it was getting to me. I had denied the resemblance all those years because I didn’t want to be known for looking like someone famous; I wanted to be known for being *me*, a writer. I had a byline, a website, published books, a toe in the roiling ocean of public awareness. That recognition had not come easily. And now I felt reduced to the doppelgänger of a TV actress.

YOU MIGHT THINK THAT BEING TOLD you look like a beautiful, famous woman is a compliment. Not for me. I felt that the pressure was on me to keep up. Ross is a decade younger, her hair is longer and thicker, curls looser. Her makeup is flawless. My idea of makeup is wearing eye pencil and a neutral lip gloss. She understands what it takes to look good in photographs. I slouch.

As if this wasn’t troubling enough, I also have a childhood connection to Diana Ross that complicates matters. Growing up in Detroit, I lived very near the Supremes during the height of their Motown celebrity. I still remember standing on the corner of Buena Vista as a little girl, staring at the house where glamorous Diana lived, hoping to get a glimpse. When I wrote the screenplay for my feature film, *Naked Acts*, I named the cool “sistah-friend” character Diana in tribute to the first woman in my midst who had chased her dream and soared, this hometown girl who had attended the same high school that I did and shattered all kinds of barriers for what black girls could do and be. This connection now made me feel complicit in my own dilemma, as though I had created the aura around which I could be mistaken for Diana Ross’s daughter.

And here’s another layer, the most unsettling of all: While I resemble this famous stranger, I have never resem-

bled anyone I’m related to. As I age, my aunt Florence says I’m beginning to look like my mom, but I never did growing up. I *wanted* to. (Ross, on the other hand, has her famous mom’s eyes, more reason for my envy.) I look nothing like my father or siblings or extended family. I have a nose that seems to have come from somewhere outside of my own family’s DNA. Until 2000, I lived my life occasionally mistaken for a Somalian or an Ethiopian, but never for someone I knew. I had assumed this would always be the case. I thought *that* was my identity. And then I became, in effect, recognizable for looking like someone else more recognizable.

Mercifully for me, *Girlfriends* went off the air, and the comparisons subsided for a few years. Then in 2014, ABC’s *Black-ish* premiered. I did not share my friends’ joy that an African-American actress had landed a plum role on prime-time TV. I knew what was coming. And sure enough, I was right, only now that Ross’s face was seemingly everywhere, the comments had morphed into “You must get this all the time, but you look just like...”

With denial no longer an option—I had even mistaken her for me!—I resorted to obsession. Every week as I tuned in to *Black-ish*, I now saw an embodiment of what I had not achieved but should have—not just a defined personal style but artistic success. Hers was in front of the camera; mine *ought* to have been behind the camera. “She’s like the younger me, only more heightened and perfected,” I lamented to my husband. “The version of me that got it right.”

“Stop it,” he said.

But I couldn’t. I felt I was losing a one-way battle. How do you compete for your identity with someone oblivious to your existence? Someone who has the advantage of a weekly audience of millions? *Black-ish* keeps getting renewed, and the years keep passing, and I keep getting double takes. The faint blip of my career as a writer has done little to counterbalance this identity grab. As time passes, I worry that Ross’s maturing face will begin to resemble mine even more; other days, I worry that as I age, people will stop seeing the resemblance altogether, and that will mark my slide into older-woman oblivion. Because no matter how much it has annoyed me for nearly 20 years, this claim that we look alike has become part of who I am. I even keep a mental note of how many days or weeks have gone by before *it* happens again.

BLACK-ISH IS CELEBRATING another season, and Ross has won a Golden Globe and been nominated for three Emmy Awards—the first African-American woman to be nominated in the lead-comedy-actress category in 30 years. She is a cultural icon. And a fashion icon as well, as evidenced by her trendsetting, stunning attire at awards

shows and galas. That, coupled with her daily presence on Instagram (of course I follow her), makes her ubiquitous. A little over a year ago while helping my daughter open a checking account, I handed my license to the bank manager, who took one look and said, “Wow, you look just like...” My daughter, Abbie, quickly responded, “Yeah, everybody tells my mom that.” I glanced at Abbie and decided, finally, just to accept my fate.

A few weeks later, my cousin Elaine called. She was 12 when I was born and adored me from day one; she brags about me to friends and regularly sends me inspirational cards with uplifting Bible passages. Everything I do, big or small, she applauds. And she has consistently validated my looks: my natural hair, my slightly bohemian style, my prominent nose. Just before hanging up, she said, “You know, Princess, whenever I miss you, I watch that show, the one with the girl on it that looks like you? Makes me feel like you’re here visiting.”

I was stunned. This was the first time someone I knew, someone who had known me forever, had made the connection between Ross and me. Yes, I’d told myself I had accepted my fate, but this was different, too close to home.

“Elaine, please tell me what it is that makes you say that,” I pleaded.

“It’s the way she walks, her voice, her hair,” Elaine said matter-of-factly. “She reminds me of you.”

I said nothing.

“What’s wrong?” Elaine asked, my silence hovering between us.

“I guess it’s just hard for me to look like someone I don’t even know,” I confessed. “When I don’t look like anyone I *do* know.”

Elaine raised her voice a bit. “But I said she looks like *you*.”

I smiled, even though she couldn’t see me. Before she hung up, my cousin said, “I love you, Princess.”

Black-ish is in its fifth season, and much of its success is due to its female star and her talent as an actress, that lovely mix of vulnerability, physicality, charm, and comedic timing. She’s a trailblazer, bringing a fresh image of a complex, smart, and funny black woman to this country’s consciousness. Something I too have tried to do in my own work. And in her role as Rainbow Johnson, she has brought vital issues for women to the fore, like postpartum depression, work-life balance, and marital sacrifice. These days, I’m as proud of her as any big sister—spiritual or otherwise—could be. And I’m proud too that Tracee Ellis Ross looks like me.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bridgett M. Davis’s first nonfiction book, *The World According to Fannie Davis*, is out on January 29. She is the author of two novels and a film and teaches at Baruch College in New York City, where she lives.