

DRIVE, SHE SAID

**AUTHOR AND SINGLE-GIRL-
ON-THE-LOOKOUT
CAROLE RADZIWIŁL
TURNS TO NASCAR FOR
THE LOVE OF...SPEED?**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SQUIRE FOX

I'm sitting in the grandstand at Martinsville Speedway, in southwestern Virginia, on an unseasonably cool spring day, surrounded by 65,000 people, most of whom are men in stiff Carhartt outerwear. The clouds are low and gray; there's talk of a rainout. I wish I'd packed warmer clothes. Forty-three racecars plastered with sponsor stickers (everything from M&M's to the green Geico gecko) are speeding around a half-mile track. I've spent the better part of the morning wandering the pit, an area in the center of the speedway where mechanics and crew chiefs roam warily amid great piles of tires. Everyone calls me "ma'am." I've wandered the grassy knoll near the parking lot where 500 RVs are wedged side by side. I've inhaled the acrid smell of burned rubber and wolfed down some pulled pork and corn bread. I've seen men in every shape and size and more Budweiser cans and American flags than you can find at a Walmart summer sale.

I am on assignment for a story that began with an e-mail all writers long to receive. The editor of this magazine had read my new novel, *The Widow's Guide to Sex and Dating*, and he wrote me to say he loved it: *I'd like to take you to lunch to discuss writing for us.* We lunched. I wore flowers. Not just any flowers, but my lucky vintage floral-print



WHAT'S A NICE GIRL LIKE ME DOING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

...WELL, SORT OF NICE GIRL.

Looking for Mr. Right: Radziwill hangs out with the pit crew at the Martinsville NASCAR race.

dress, in yellow. I bought it five years ago when a psychic predicted I'd be wearing one when I found love. Love has been elusive, but the dress hasn't failed. We talked shop, then moved on to dating—much more interesting. *What are you looking for in someone?* I didn't want to disappoint him (I was angling for an assignment!), but “looking” isn't a verb I use with dating. I don't look; I glance. I observe. I'm a voyeur in my own love life. I'm a lion when it comes to dating, I sit and wait for long stretches of time, observing the plains, and when I'm hungry enough and something catches my attention, I pounce.

Richard (we were on to first names at this point) segued: “Men and work. Okay, what can you pitch me?”

I had some ideas. I've always been an adventure junkie, beginning with my entrée into network news just out of college. I spent my first 15 adult years scouting the world. I went to Tel Aviv in pursuit of Saddam's Scud missile attacks, to Cambodian refugee camps to report on the Khmer Rouge, to Kandahar in Afghanistan during the Afghan War. I love the adrenaline rush. I have a peculiar lust for danger, living without a safety net. I don't trust nets. If I had a nickel for every man who said he'd catch me if I fell, I'd have a nickel.

If I wanted an assignment that would put me in proximity to real men, I had to go where they congregate. Steakhouses, strip clubs, I thought. Or anywhere in close proximity to speed. Yes. Men and cars. I suggested a story on NASCAR. I'm thinking of Steve McQueen in *Bullitt*. Burt Reynolds in *The Cannonball Run*. Or my childhood favorite, Dick Van Dyke racing *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

My first crush drove a white Chevy Camaro with a T-top and red leather bucket seats. I was a sophomore; he was a senior. My relationships in life sometimes mirror my relationships with cars—fast, bumpy rides. I like my cars fast. I did a weekend of community service at the South Hampton Thrift Shop as a result of a 104 mile-per-hour speeding ticket I got on the Long Island Expressway. (Fess up: Who hasn't driven over 100 miles per hour on the LIE?) Three speeding tickets and many points on my license later, I sold my car.

My pitch to Richard worked. I was off to the South, the heart of NASCAR racing. But first, what to wear? I surveyed my closet of Alaïa dresses, Nina Ricci tops and Prada coats and settled on jeans. Jeans and my off-white chiffon-lined Chanel jacket. Perfect for a day at the races. Then I thought, What the hell *is* NASCAR?

The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing is the second most widely viewed professional sport after football in the United States (or judo, depending on which Google search result you believe). It's popular. NASCAR's roots go back as far as Prohibition, which may explain the liberal alcohol policy at the track. Drivers hired by liquor establishments moved moonshine across state lines in souped-up cars to outrun federal agents. Known as “runners,” they built their reputation on speed. They held informal races to determine who was the fastest. There were bragging rights.

THERE IS ENOUGH TESTOSTERONE HERE TO FUEL A SMALL COUNTRY.

By the late '40s these races had been officially organized under a man named Bill France Sr., a former driver known as Big Bill. Together with the drivers, mechanics and car owners, France gave birth to NASCAR in 1947; they wrote up some rules and a points system on cocktail napkins in Daytona Beach, which became formalized in 1975. Today there are 100 million fans and an estimated \$3 billion worth of licensed products. That's a lot of logos and mesh hats.

Pit row is where, I'm told, all the action happens, and I want action. I introduce myself to the fire marshal and his crew. They're visibly amused at a city girl in heels here. I wander around hoping to find a racecar driver or at least a hot mechanic. *Hello, can you point me in the direction of the drivers, please?*

The speedway is shaped like a paper clip, and the pit road is 46 feet wide, with enough tires, bumpers, spark plugs and brake pads to refurbish every car on the General Motors assembly line. I've met jack men, gas men and tire carriers—they're all specialists. I know that tires are changed every 50 or so laps, about ten times a race, and that a pit crew can replace all four in 15 seconds. Tanks need refilling every 22 gallons, it takes 500 laps to hit the finish line, and the drivers make only left turns around the track, which makes me think, Hmm, this might be easier than it looks. Cars go 120 miles per hour on the short straight and 60 miles per hour around the turns. I've learned from talking to the drivers that their strategy is pretty simple: “Win.”

These races are powered by Sunoco gas, Mobil 1 oil and a stadium-sized shot glass of testosterone. This is why I'm here, on an oil-slicked track in Virginia and not in my cushy SoHo apartment in New York—for the smell of testosterone. There's enough of it here to fuel a small country.

To bide my time, I buy a hot dog. I love a good hot dog from the New York City sidewalk carts. This dog, however, is the strangest color red. It resembles something left over from the cafeteria in a leaky plutonium plant. I take a bite and smile, not wanting to disappoint the two elderly Southern women who are staring at me, grinning.

I'm distracted by the sudden presence of a large man who introduces himself as one of Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s pit bosses. *Sorry to bother you, ma'am, but are you the girl from that show?* Dale, it turns out, is a man-sized *Real Housewives of New York City* fan. Oh, right, that's another thing—I'm a Real Housewife. The show comes with anxiety and stress, but there are upsides, too. One is that the most unlikely people are fans. (I was once at a dinner with Anjelica Huston and learned that she watches every week.) Most of the access that I am granted in the pit is because of the show. Earnhardt's gorgeous girlfriend, Amy, greets me at the crew trailer. I tell them how excited I am to be at my first NASCAR race. They give me a Mountain Dew.

In between fielding questions about Ramona and the Countess (my television colleagues), I ask Earnhardt about racing. He's been doing

Martinsville Speedway
in Ridgeway, Virginia, hosts
the sixth race in the 2014
NASCAR Sprint Cup Series.



this for almost 25 years. I tell him I'd like to get behind the wheel one day, on the track. His advice? It's all about the tires. Every 50 laps the tires need to be changed. Drivers who race aggressively wear them out quicker and because of that make more time-consuming stops. Fast and steady wins.

I leave their trailer and wander over to the McDonald's car to wait for its driver, Jamie McMurray, who is tall, handsome and a germophobe. A bottle of Purell sits on the roof of his car. For some reason I fist-bump him when he comes over. He looks confused. A fist bump is not part of his prerace checklist. We take a photo, and I'm rushed off to meet the mechanics. I ask a few questions about the engines and the dashboard. I'm interested in blank and blank, but I don't remember a single thing.

Then the stadium grows silent, and the national anthem comes on. The crowd stands and turns toward the enormous American flag. I put my hand over my heart and sing along. There is something powerful about 65,000 people with hands over hearts pledging solemnly to the Stars and Stripes. Nothing says America like a racetrack hot dog, a McDonald's-sponsored racecar and, of course, the anthem.

The racecars are lined up so close, the bumpers touch. The track is surprisingly short; the cars pass and seconds later pass again. It all happens fast. Five minutes into the race, the Swan Energy car swerves and crashes into the side wall. The Quicken car quickly veers to the right to avoid a pileup. Within seconds a tow truck pulls the smashed car into the pit area. It's now missing its entire hood and front panels.

Unlike at a baseball or football game, the spectators at NASCAR are for the most part silent, watching the cars go around and around at breakneck speed. It's like watching tennis, but instead of heads moving back and forth, these heads move up and down, following the track, never taking their eyes off their favorite driver. Kurt Busch, Jimmie Johnson, Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Jeff Gordon: In this world, these names eclipse ones like Kardashian.

The day after the race, still in search of the man and the fast car of my idyllic image, I arrange to meet Kasey Kahne, a 34-year-old NASCAR driver. We meet at the Hendrick Motorsports plant in Concord, North Carolina, where his team's cars are assembled, systems are calibrated and decals are applied. He came in 22nd at Martinsville and is here to go over his mistakes, strategizing for his next event, in Texas.

I ask him about his tires. He tells me his strategy is to "go fast." He is a man of very few words. He takes me for a ride in a Chevy SS, the production version of the racecar he had driven a day earlier and the car Chevrolet had given me to drive from the airport. I told him I'd gotten it up to 102 miles per hour on the I-85. Not to be outdone, especially by a girl, he takes off down a quaint country road and without a blink gets the car to 102. A tie is good enough for him. A wry but humble smile and Paul Newman eyes belie his age.

This is NASCAR country. The people who fill it believe in God, racecars and barbecue. I wasn't wearing my flower-print dress for my ride with Kahne, but those blue eyes and that sure hand on the wheel... maybe my psychic was wrong. ♦

Clockwise, from top left: Forty-three cars take to the track; the American spirit runs deep in these parts; city girl Radziwill manages in heels; after 50 laps, there's a tire change; Radziwill goes for a turn behind the wheel.

