

I lived for 41 years on this planet content with being The Good Girl.

Ingrid Steffensen

I help the pretty blonde, a dental hygienist from Baltimore, get securely strapped in. She wedges her helmet on, I hand her the communicator, and she's ready for some action. "Can you hear me now?" I ask, in a dorky echo of that stupid cell phone commercial. "Yeah, I can hear you," she answers. "You good to go?" I check in again. "I sure am!" she enthuses. "Right then, we're off!" I affirm, and as I'm waved onto the track, I swing into the tight, rhythmic esses that initiate this track's complicated sequence, and which my light, nimble car was born to conquer. This is my most favorite racetrack: not that fast, highly technical, and with a banked carousel that, to me, is worth the price of admission. If you aim your front left wheel in just the right spot, the entrance angle yanks the car down into the bowl as if it were on a chain, and then it pins the car to the angled surface, holding it down with momentum as it curls you around 180 degrees and then spits you out at the other end.

"Yee-haw," I yell, telling her it's obligatory each time we go around this carousel.

"Yee-haw," she agrees, obediently.

I like this girl.

I pass a number of other drivers, because the tight, technical layout favors my weaponry—which is extremely nimble but not that powerful. A couple of times during the 20-minute session, I check in with her, to make sure all this tossing around isn't threatening to upend her lunch.

"Feeling OK?" I ask.

"Fine," she says.

"Still having fun?" I inquire.

"Oh, yeah," she replies.

I like this girl very much, I decide.

The checkered flag is waved; we reach the end of the circuit, and I pull regretfully off the track. A most satisfactory session, I think. My passenger extricates herself from the car. She removes the helmet, fluffs her gleaming, golden hair, and pronounces—with gratifying volume:

"Oh my gawd, you are *such a badass!*"

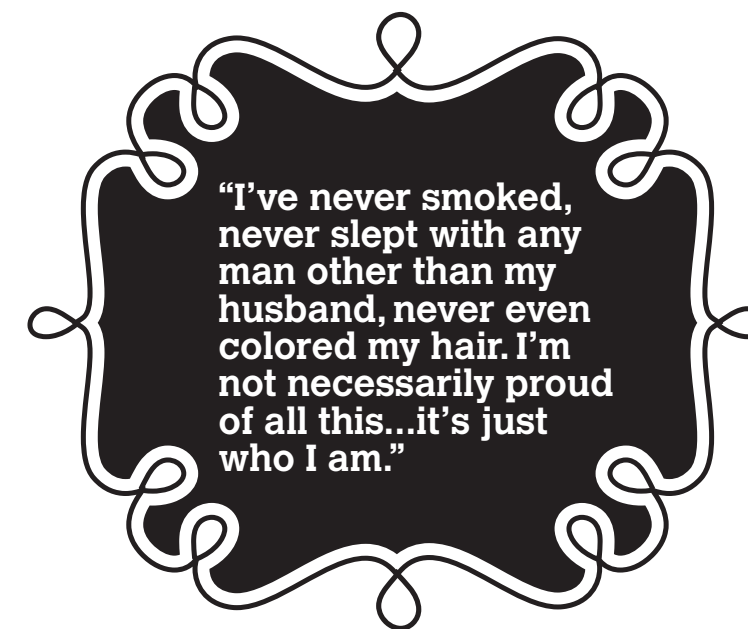
Oh, I like this girl a lot.

Here's the truth of it: I am as far from a badass as you can probably dig up in this age in which marijuana has been legalized, pregnant teenagers get their own reality shows, and suburban soccer moms get tattoos and wear stilettos. When Stockard Channing sang "Look at Me, I'm Sandra Dee" in *Grease*, I knew in my heart of hearts that she was singing about me. I've never smoked, never slept with any man other than my husband, never even colored my hair. I'm not necessarily proud of all this (actually, it's a little embarrassing)—it's just who I am. I'm a nerd, a pleaser, a cocooner. My idea of getting really risqué is to add some cayenne pepper to my chocolate cookies. (Awesome, incidentally: The hot pepper interacts with and enlivens the suaveness of the cocoa like Lucy does to Ricky Ricardo.)

I lived for 41 years on this planet content with being The Good Girl. The world needs its Angelina Jolies, its Bonnie Parkers, its Rizzos and Jessica Rabbits. If we didn't have them, we wouldn't know where the boundaries were.

But I was happy enough not being one of them. Their lives may be a great deal more exciting than mine, but they also seem to invite a lot of heartache, poor fashion choices, and regrettable tattoos.

When I trepidatiously began my high-speed odyssey on the racetrack, it was not as a way of thumbing my nose at society or rebelling against the self-imposed strictures of being a loyal wife, responsible mother, dedicated educator, or organic-kale-eater. Rather the opposite: I just thought this was a good way to understand my gearhead husband a little better. Oh, the things we do for love!



A curious byproduct of the entire venture, however, is that the world's perspective seems to have shifted in the way it regards me. Before, I was a completely unremarkable woman, someone who toed the line of conventional societal expectations in every way. But now, as someone who drives racecars as a hobby, I have become something of an oddity: a woman who challenges the status quo, who dares to flout the conventional ways a middle-aged, law-abiding wife and mother is expected to behave. I seem to have gone from Sandra Dee to Badass in 4.3 seconds simply by donning a helmet and pushing my foot down to the floor.

It's not just cute blond dental hygienists who have called me a badass. "Read my friend's book," posted one sandbox friend who lives on the left-hand coast and whom I have not seen in a quarter of a century, "she's a total badass!" It is very strange for laundry-list me to see myself in this new light, and it has made me wonder: What, exactly, constitutes (to coin a term) badassness?

If you turn to the great and powerful Internet and look up "badass" on the openly edited Urban Dictionary, you will find that its contributors provide exclusively male examples with which to define the term: Dirty Harry, Steve McQueen, Sam Elliott. The badass smokes, drinks beer or whisky (definitely never a nice Merlot), wears jeans that are torn by the wearer and not the designer, rarely speaks, and when he does, he lets his fists or his pool cue do the talking.

Urban Dictionary, it appears, has completely missed out on the phenomenon that is the female badass.

So what makes a female badass? I think, like pornography, we know it when we see it. The hard-rockin' Joan Jett is most definitely a badass, likewise Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Pink. The butt-kicking, motivational fitness guru Jillian Michaels is a badass. So is Jeannette Lee, the nationally ranked professional pool player. Hillary Clinton—badass. Michelle Obama—not so much.

"Badass," when applied to women, seems to be reserved for those who are tough, daring, even brazen, and it's also a term, as far as I can tell, of high approbation. I'm a little in love with my newly acquired badassness. I never went in search of it, and you mustn't look too hard at it or it will dissolve in the light of my neatly organized recipe binder, but after decades of quiet rule-following, I certainly enjoy thinking I could join such illustrious company. Ultimately, if you want to be a badass, you have to embrace your bravest, most authentic self. If that's what being a badass truly is, then yeah—I'm a badass, and proud of it.

Ingrid Steffensen has translated her newfound passion for racing and life into a book, Fast Girl: Don't Brake Until You See the Face of God and Other Good Advice from the Racetrack, and her writing has appeared in The New York Times, New Jersey Monthly, and The Wine Enthusiast, among others.

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