

An Introduction to Brass Knuckles

I was too young to drive, so I rode to our gigs with Bobby in his gold '67 Pontiac GTO. Red foam dice dangled from the rearview mirror and the seats were black rolled and pleated leather. A nicotine fog hovered under the headliner, and a mixture of sweat, cheap cologne, and dried beer on the carpet gave the car a honky-tonk feel.

Bobby had a standard operating procedure when he got behind the wheel. He grabbed a Kool from his shirt pocket and drooped it from his lips for a few seconds while he turned on the ignition. He revved the engine three times, making it roar and pop, and then he reached into the glove box and grabbed a set of coal black, wraparound sunglasses that made him look like a Martian. He snapped his head around before takeoff and looked straight at me. "Are you ready?"

I wasn't, but I said "yes," anyway.

Bobby meandered into our band rehearsal one humid Tennessee evening, clutching a burning cigarette in one hand and a black, weathered hard-shell case in the other. He clunked the case down on the gray basement floor and took a deep drag from the cigarette. "I heard you were looking for band members."

That was somewhat true. We formed the band with the sole purpose of attracting young girls who liked to dance with reckless abandon to three-chord songs. We had a lead singer, but we turned his microphone down to disguise the fact that he couldn't sing or remember song lyrics.

I was fifteen; the other guys were a year older. None of us could read music or play lead parts, so we compensated by inserting drum solos in the middle of every song.

When the girls began fleeing the dancefloor (some even left the building), we knew we had to recruit a professional musician to fill the void.

Bobby looked twice our age and was way cooler. He was six feet tall and wore a black dress shirt and black dress slacks that transitioned to a pair of black pointed-toe boots. A chain bracelet wrapped around his wrist, and a silver pinky ring with a purple stone glistened on his right hand. A crown of short, curly red/brown hair topped his freckled head, and neatly trimmed sideburns fell two inches below his ears and pointed toward his nose.

He said he once played with dance bands in Nashville clubs, but now he worked a factory job during the day to pay the bills. Our bass player's cousin's brother worked with Bobby and told him we were looking for someone to play leads.

When he popped the latches on the worn, black case and separated the golden, twinkling Selmer tenor saxophone from the dark purple velvet padding, I thought of black and white photos of dance bands I saw taped to the walls at Hewgley's Music downtown. The band members were dressed in sparkly stage costumes, always smiling, looking up at the camera, and holding their instruments in the air.

Before Bobby, my exposure to the saxophone was limited. Band students at our high school played them marching in straight lines while staring at sheet music, but the saxophones were often drowned out by louder instruments like tubas and bass drums. My expectations about how Bobby and his saxophone might fit into our pubescent enclave were mixed.

The first tune we played at the audition was a high-energy, three-chord, drum-pounding affair. When it came time for Bobby to play a solo, he jumped a couple of feet

in the air and twisted his body to one side to hit a blistering high note. I sensed this was not the first time he had done this. I was envious and mystified that someone had that much energy and passion for the music at a rehearsal with teenage boys. He wasn't doing it to impress us; he wasn't even getting paid; that's who he was.

Our maiden gig with Bobby was about forty minutes away at a Teen Town—code for dancehalls filled with young booze-soaked guys proficient in sloppy dancing, ass-grabbing, and throwing wild drunken punches.

Bobby drove me to the gig on a curvy, tree-lined backroad instead of taking the main highway. I didn't ask why. I figured he liked scenic routes or got bored driving like a normal person.

We were about halfway to our destination, and the sun was starting to set when Bobby pulled into the gravel parking lot of a cut-and-shoot beer joint called the Bloody Bucket. A group of aspiring drunks huddled outside the doorway, smoking cigarettes. He let the GTO rumble in neutral for a couple of minutes while he lit a Kool and placed his Martian sunglasses in the glove box. Suddenly, the drunks started shouting, and I looked around to see one of them pointing his finger at us.

Bobby lunged his body toward the Hurst shifter and jerked it into first gear while he stomped on the chrome gas pedal, making the back end of the car spin sideways in the gravel. The tires squealed when they hit the pavement, and a plume of grayish-brown smoke engulfed the car. Gravity hurled my 115-pound body against the bucket seat, and when he shifted to second gear, my body flopped forward like a ragdoll and back again when he hit third gear. I imagined what space travel must be like, leaving the launching pad and shifting into fourth gear as our rocket propelled into the abyss.

I understood our quick exit from the parking lot when I looked in the side mirror. A bunch of guys was running toward a black car with shiny chrome wheels. The car fishtailed out of the parking lot, throwing gravel and dust in its wake. It got closer and closer to our car like it was on a mission. I was hoping it was a friend of Bobby's wanting to catch up on old times.

The interior of the black car was stuffed with older guys, all wearing white t-shirts with sleeves rolled up to their shoulders. They began shaking their fists out the windows and extending their middle fingers, bobbing them against the slipstream of the speeding GTO. I got the impression they weren't Bobby's friends. The driver blew the horn in short, loud bursts, followed by one loud irritating, atonal blast.

The muscles on Bobby's face chiseled. He sucked the last bit of nicotine out of his Kool, thumped it out the window, and released the smoke from his lips into the GTO's cabin with the force of a punctured steam pipe.

I'd come to know that Bobby was a no-nonsense kind of guy who didn't speak many words. When he cleared his throat, I knew he had thought about what he was going to say.

"We have a problem," Bobby, now chewing gum, announced in a stern, low voice. It seemed like a long time had lapsed before he got to his next sentence. My mind obsessed over the word "problem." I wondered if he would provide more information.

"The guys on our bumper will beat our asses if we stop."

I turned slightly in my seat to peek at the car full of yahoos throwing empty beer bottles at road signs. When they saw me, they resumed shaking their fists and shooting "birds" at us out of the car's side windows.

“There was a woman,” Bobby continued solemnly like he was sharing origin stories with cavemen around a roaring fire. He spit out the window and wiped his mouth with the back of his right hand. “We got together one night, and I guess somebody didn’t like it.” There was a lot for my young imagination to unpack with few details. I pieced together that one of the yahoos had been offended by Bobby’s actions; maybe he was a boyfriend or the driver of the black car who jumped at an opportunity to get revenge when he saw our car in the Bloody Bucket parking lot.

Without warning, the menacing black car rammed our car twice. BAM! BAM!

Bobby looked ahead with both hands placed firmly on the steering wheel. His face was calm, his eyes intense. “There’s some brass knuckles, a Billy Club, and a switchblade under your seat if we have to fight.”

I’d seen pictures of these tools in a borrowed *True Detective* magazine when our family went to the Redneck Riviera one summer. In that issue, a guy named Angel crossed a local mobster who took revenge by cutting Angel’s fingertips off both hands with a switchblade knife. Then, they beat him in the face with brass knuckles and finished the job by bashing him with a Billy Club.

Bobby accelerated the GTO, shifting hard through the curves. My brain moved from *I didn’t sign up for this shit*, to pondering the worst thing that could happen if they caught us. Maybe one of them would pull a knife blade across my throat, leaving a jagged scar that I would have to explain at a job interview one day if I ever got one.

I reached under my seat, pulled out the brass knuckles, the Billy Club, and the switchblade, and spread them across the car’s rubber floor mat. I inspected them closely.

The Billy Club was about two feet long, made of faded black leather, and weighted on one end. I shook it back and forth, trying to figure out how to swing it.

The chrome switchblade knife was six inches long and doubled in size when I pressed the button on the side. I laid it on the floorboard, picked up the brass knuckles, put them on my right hand, and held them up in the seductive glow of the dashboard light. They gleamed in the darkness like a piece of exotic jewelry made for a king. My hand felt sturdier when I made a fist. I imagined trying to knock out someone's teeth with them. There was what looked like dried blood on the second brass knuckle. Maybe someone had already done this. I laid the Billy Club across my lap and kept the brass knuckles on my right hand.

Bobby snapped his head around and commanded: "Sit up in the seat and look bigger than you are. There's four of them. We need to look like we can take 'em."

I thought: *how in the hell would that even work?* I didn't have a better plan, so I pushed against the car seat with the brass knuckles on my hand and stretched my small frame up the seat to where my head was the same height as Bobby's. For some reason, I felt bigger, more confident.

He punched the gas pedal on the GTO at once, and the engine roared like an unbridled, screaming banshee. The trees and road signs blurred; our tires screeched, trying to hold to the pavement on hairpin curves at 70 miles per hour. Bobby shifted, downshifted, stomped on the gas pedal and then the brake, which sent the red foam dice bobbing back and forth into the windshield. The white center line, illuminated by our headlights on the black asphalt, created a hypnotic state that temporarily took my mind away from our predicament and what might come next.

Eventually, the headlights of the black car started to fade in my side mirror. I exhaled as Bobby pulled the reins back on the galloping GTO, took a cigarette from his shirt pocket, and lit it like nothing had happened. Another day at the office. I'm glad I didn't show weakness by shitting my pants. I could have. I kept the brass knuckles on my hand and the Billy club in my lap until we reached Teen Town—just in case.

The show that night was one of our best. Bobby wore one of his club costumes, featuring a light blue satin shirt with puffy sleeves. He jumped in the air during every sax solo while a crowd of mostly teenage girls clapped.

We were finishing the last song of our set, our singer was screaming into the microphone (turned down low), Bobby was cradling his saxophone, dancing to the rhythm of the pounding drums, and I was strumming away from a palette of basic chords.

That's when I saw them coming from the back of the room, four guys wearing white tee-shirts rolled up to their shoulders, in a hurry, cigarettes drooping from their mouths; one was holding a beer bottle by the neck, another a baseball bat, pushing and shoving their way through the crowded dancefloor toward the bandstand. I locked eyes with Bobby and then glanced to the side of the stage, where a pair of golden brass knuckles teased me from the red velvet lining of my open guitar case.