



## **TNB Original Fiction: Excerpt of *Baby Driver*, by Susan Lindheim**

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Original Fiction



*Southwestern Arkansas, 1934*

Lily peeked out the bathroom window and saw that nothing had changed: her mother Rose — wedding band hidden in her purse — was still flirting with the filling station attendant while her grandmother Miriam paced circles around the pale yellow Dodge sedan with the Chihuahua at her heels. One day Miriam’s jitteriness would give them all away, Lily was sure of it. One day they’d all get arrested because Miriam couldn’t just flat out pretend.

Edgar was already gone.

Lily picked at the sole remaining chip of white paint that clung to the windowsill. Times were hard and paint was dear. Along the grain of the parched wood, splinters jutted out in all directions. Not much more than

dust held it all together. Silt hung thick in the air, still and suspended, filtering the light from the bathroom's bare bulb and turning it a flat grayish brown. In the corner, the leaky toilet kept on hissing.

Lily tugged at the stockings she'd been wearing since Little Rock, the silk now fully plastered to her legs. It had to be over 100 outside. "Respectable Jewish girls don't go showing their naked legs to all of Arkansas, or anywhere else." She heard Miriam's accent in her head, an uneven hybrid of Britain and Brooklyn. It was followed, as always, by Rose's slightly nasal retort, "It has nothing to do with *religion*, Mother. Her bare legs are ugly. It's that simple."

Lily stepped away from the window. Her bobbed black hair pressed flat into her cheekbone from under the floppy cloth hat that made her whole head itch. She'd never hear the end of it from her mother if she removed the hat, though, even here. Because you never know who might catch a glimpse of you, when or where, to what *effect*. As if appearances alone would be enough to save them.

She leaned over the sink and splashed the rust-colored water onto her skin, savoring the cool wetness of it as it dribbled down her cheeks and neck and onto the lace collar of her blouse. She leaned in closer for another precious splash. A flash of light caught her eye.

The glint of a syringe. Lying in the crease where the floor met the wall.

Uncle Edgar was getting sloppy again.

Before she could realize that she'd actually done it, Lily picked up the syringe and was wiping it clean with the frayed rag by the sink. Her hand trembled. In all this time, she had never actually touched one herself. Silver metal framed both ends, and a leather plunger floated inside glass so clear and crisp and delicate it seemed it was hardly there except in the way that light bounced off it. Nearly weightless, so easily shattered and unsubstantial. And yet the very act of making sure that there was enough heroin for Edgar to keep it filled had come to consume her whole life.

June 23, 1933, that was the date it all began. A little over a year ago. Two weeks after Lily's high school graduation, ten days after she'd turned sixteen. She passed the New York driving exam in the late morning and by early afternoon Miriam had appointed her the family driver. Miriam emphasized *family*. From then on, it was up to Lily to take the family car out alone, or sometimes with Edgar, depending on his mood and needs.

The dust tickled from inside her nostrils. Lily tried her best not to sneeze or inhale the heavy scent of rust and urine and human waste. And she asked herself again whether prison would smell like this.

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The dog had tried to alert her. The puppy Chihuahua that Rose had acquired on a whim before they left New York but which refused to go near her had started growling as Lily screwed the radiator cap back on. But Lily ignored the puppy. He liked to practice his growl, to test the sheer power and range of it on insects and small rodents and immobile but strangely shaped mounds of dirt. Lily focused instead on finishing her routine inspection of the car. The radiator water level had already checked out fine, the oil, too; the tread of the tires was still thick enough when measured between the edge of the penny and the tip of Lincoln's nose to be serviceable for at least another couple hundred miles. She was storing the grease-spotted rag in the trunk when the low growl turned into an actual bark. The dog backed onto her shoe.

"Shush, Teddy," she said, slamming the trunk shut. She looked up as an Arkansas state highway patrolman was pulling into the filling station on his motorcycle.

The lanky officer waved to Lily as he slowed to a stop, and her gut twisted itself into that all too familiar hard knot. If only she hadn't taken the time to stow her uncle's syringe inside the hissing toilet tank, just in case, she would already have joined Rose and Miriam – and hopefully, by now, Edgar too — at Cecil's Diner down the road.

Lily waved back at the policeman, just like any innocent person would. While it was true that alcohol was no longer prohibited in most parts of the country, heroin was still strictly illegal across each and every state. Lily forced a smile and reminded herself that this officer had no reason to inspect her car, no cause to even begin to wonder whether the back seat was littered with “perfectly legitimate medicinal vials” all with different labels and the same white powder inside. It would all be fine, should all be fine, Lily told herself as she watched him remove his leather helmet and sun goggles. So long as Edgar didn’t decide to all of a sudden reappear and search for his favorite travel syringe the way he had back in Pennsylvania.

At least that time, they had been alone.

Lily picked up the dog and moved over to the driver’s side of the car, careful to appear natural, not too eager. She had no sooner set Teddy down on the front seat than he leaped back onto the dirt.

“Teddy!” she called.

The dog darted off in the direction of the policeman, stopping just short of the motorcycle. Teddy crouched onto his haunches so low his belly rubbed the hot dirt.

“He’s just a puppy,” Lily said to the officer.

Teddy barked, loud and shrill.

“Horny toad,” the officer said. Or at least that was what it sounded like to Lily, the half-swallowed words.

Lily turned to the policeman and tried to discern his meaning, or intent. He was shaking his head.

“The lizard,” he said, finally, pointing at it, gray-green with red wrinkles and a band of spikes along its head. Standing sentinel atop an empty anthill, staring the puppy down.

Teddy snarled.

The lizard puffed itself into a spiky balloon. A bright bead of crimson red blood gleamed from between its dark unwavering eyes.

The dog slunk backwards, towards the tip of the patrolman's dusty black boots.

"Teddy!" Lily cried.

The officer kicked the lizard, hard. The creature deflated rapidly as it rolled over in the dirt, once, then twice. Both ends of its wrinkled body sagged low as it scuttled and dragged itself away, the spikes on its back still erect.

"Horny toads," the officer said, looking up at Lily now, straight on. "Got to put them in their proper place or they'll be going around thinking they can take over anything they like." He looked back at the empty highway, the thirsty gray-brown land all around. "Just like them banks."

Lily scooped up the dog. "Thanks," she said to the officer. Or mouthed. The word so quiet she wasn't quite sure.

He nodded at her, his eyes ringed with skin that seemed artificially paled in the pattern of sun goggles, the rest of his face so red and raw. He was younger than she had first thought, much closer to her own age, but already the world had worn him so different. He reached out a glove for the dog to sniff. "Teddy," he said. "You rich folk sure do have some funny looking dogs."

Lily bristled despite herself.

It was true, they weren't terrible poor like those dispossessed farmers they'd been passing on the roads, hunkered down with their too big families and too few possessions in vehicles that looked much more likely to bust than make it to California; but they certainly weren't one of those silver spoon families either. Her father was a tailor who had

snuck out of Russia alone in a hay cart and travelled steerage class to Ellis Island before he had even turned ten. He had worked hard to climb his way up through the garment district, the consumptive lower East Side tenements, the Brooklyn naval stockyards, to build and grow his own military uniform business from nothing to the something it was now: three full-time stores after this summer with twelve employees, and six of them not even family.

“New York.” This officer made it sound like three syllables. He was studying the car, driver’s side door still gaping open, the inside exposed.

Lily’s heart pounded so hard in her throat that it felt like it was strangling her. Just how much could he see from here? “Now that’s a license plate you don’t often see around these parts,” he continued.

She tucked the dog under her arm. She reminded herself that to sprint now would most certainly give her away. Steady and natural, she told herself as she walked as fast as she could. The officer kept pace with her easily.

“A full week’s drive, I’d reckon,” he said.

“Five days,” Lily said. The words scratched at her throat. “It took us five days to get here.” And five more still to go, assuming both the weather and their luck held.

She shut the car door and positioned herself in front of it, blocking his view as much as she could. Teddy was still in her arms.

“My mother’s waiting for me,” Lily said, meeting his gaze and attempting to keep it from wandering. “My grandmother, too. They’re expecting me. At the diner just down the road.”

The officer nodded. His eyes were the slate gray color of clouds that never quite rained.

“Said they’d order me lunch while I filled up the car,” Lily continued. Keep talking, she told herself. Distract him. “A cheese sandwich, if they have it,” Lily said as she forced a smile. “I do love melted cheese sandwiches, don’t you? Freshly melted cheese and a sarsaparilla.”

The officer frowned. His gaze drifted from Lily’s face to the dog to the car. “You do all the driving,” he said. Not a question, but a statement.

Lily swallowed hard. Her whole mouth tasted of earthy dust. What else could he tell just by looking at her?

Teddy wriggled in her arms and started to whimper.

“Do you happen to remember what the odometer said when you started?” the officer asked as he attempted to peer over her shoulder and into the car.

She readjusted her stance. “Should...is that something I’m supposed to know?”

The officer leaned in closer. “You don’t mind if I have a look, do you?”

Teddy growled.

Lily and the officer both turned at the same time to see him approaching. The man’s body blended into its own shadow, a single hunching dark form.

*It wasn’t necessarily Edgar.*

“Hey you!” the officer yelled.

The figure stopped and turned. Lily exhaled a slow sigh.

“Need to use the toilet,” the vagrant said as he tipped a tattered hat to the officer, and Lily.

Teddy barked, high-pitched and loud. Like a siren.

“We’d best be going,” Lily said to the patrolman as she slid herself into the car. She pushed the still barking dog onto the Arkansas state maps lying open across the middle front seat. “It was a pleasure to meet you,” she told the officer through the half-opened window as she started the ignition. “Thank you for your help with that horrible lizard.”

The officer met her gaze and held it. “Be careful out there,” he said. His tone was warm, concerned. “You never do know what you might find.”

Lily nodded back at him and forced another smile. Without taking her eyes off either the patrolman or the road just ahead, she shifted the family Dodge into gear.

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Rose and Miriam barely nodded when Lily first walked into the diner. Edgar was indeed beside them, his square jawed face dominated by those heavy-lidded brown eyes that spoke a language entirely their own, hidden behind an upside-down copy of the Arkansas Gazette. Only his thick shock of wavy black hair was visible, smoothed back into place now, a sign that Lily knew meant that the initial euphoria had already passed and edged itself into that cloud of sheer numb. He didn’t bother to look up.

“We’ve got to get moving,” Lily said when she was in front of the table, the car keys dangling from her hand. A melted cheese sandwich congealed on the plate in front of Edgar. Her mother and grandmother had already finished their lunch. “Now.”

“We didn’t order anything for you,” Miriam said.

“She can eat the melted cheese,” Rose said.

“We don’t have time,” Lily said. “I’m serious.”

“So am I,” Rose said. “Sit down and eat this sandwich. It’s perfectly average and we *paid* for it already.”

There was only one other family in the diner, seated by the door, a father and his rosy-cheeked little girl both with the same stubby nose and close-set eyes. The girl was savoring every drop of her vanilla milkshake as the unsmiling man looked on.

Lily stared at them both, her mother and grandmother, each with that same set square jaw. “There were *complications* at the filling station.” She nodded at Edgar, his shirtsleeves rolled up just far enough to expose the trail of scars on his nearly hairless forearms.

Rose’s shoulders drooped as she let her normally prominent chest cave in on itself, her sigh as pathetic as the words, “again, so soon.” Her mother pulled the newspaper away from Edgar’s face while Miriam started tugging at the sleeves of his shirt. Rose snatched up their handbags and hats, as Miriam cajoled Edgar to stand or at least stoop to her own height. Rose and Miriam shuffled Edgar to the door, one on either side, while Lily followed close behind.

As she was reaching for the door handle, Lily felt the tap on her shoulder.

She gasped.

“Sorry ma’am,” the boney waitress said. She was holding Edgar’s sandwich, wrapped in wax paper, the grease already soaking through. “Didn’t think you meant to leave this behind.”

“Thanks,” Lily whispered as she dug into her purse to try to find some kind of change to make up for the tip she was certain her mother forgot.

“Save it for later on, when you really need it,” the waitress said.

Lily nodded. She pulled a folded dollar bill out from her wallet and pressed it into the waitress’ hand in exchange for the soggy sandwich she knew would sink straight to the bottom of her stomach and wallow there for the duration of the sweltering afternoon. But she would eat it

anyway. Because she was hungry, and there was still such a long way to drive.

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**SUSAN LINDHEIM** is a writer living in Los Angeles. She won the UCLA Extension Writing Program's Kirkwood Prize for an excerpt from *Baby Driver*, a novel based on her grandmother's true-life experiences as a teenager during the 1930s. Her short fiction has been published in the *South Dakota Review*, performed as part of the New Short Fiction Series in Los Angeles, and included in *Voice from the Planet*, an anthology of international fiction. Additionally, her screenplay, *Travels With Gonzalo*, was a quarterfinalist in the Nicholl Fellowship competition. Lindheim earned degrees from Stanford University and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. She speaks Spanish, French and some very rusty Russian.

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