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—*Entertainment Weekly*

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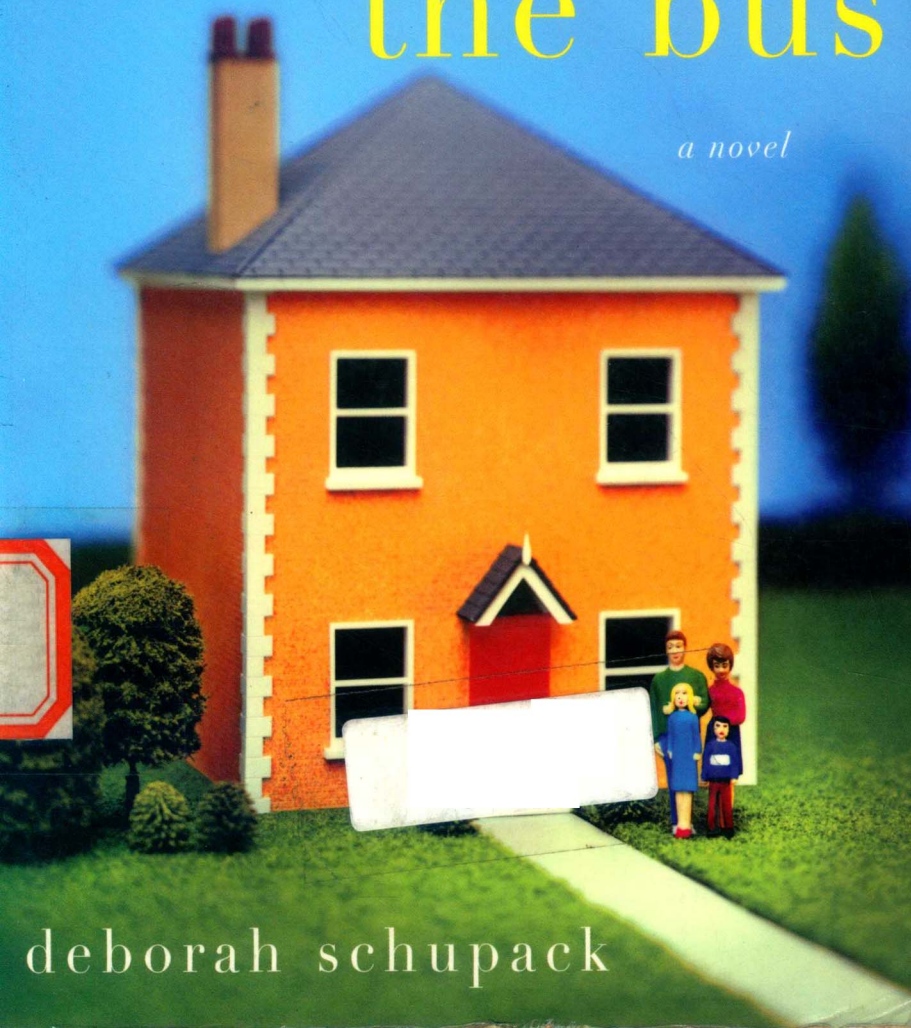

deborah schupack

THE BOY ON THE BUS

A Novel

Deborah Schupack

FREE PRESS

New York London Toronto Sydney

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FREE PRESS
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

First Free Press trade paperback edition 2004

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For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales: 1-800-456-6798 or business@simonandschuster.com

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:
Schupack, Deborah.
The boy on the bus : a novel / Deborah Schupack.
p. cm.
1. Mothers and sons—Fiction. 2. Identity (Psychology)—Fiction.
3. Vermont—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3619.C483 B69 2003
813'.6—dc21 2002032179
ISBN 0-7432-4220-3 ISBN 0-7432-4221-1 (Pbk)

Praise for *The Boy on the Bus*

"So deftly does Deborah Schupack thread this first novel of psychological suspense with plaintive insight that a reader leaves *The Boy on the Bus* both chilled and sorrowful. . . . Disturbing in the manner of Henry James's *Turn of the Screw,* it haunts us as well with the specter of a family isolated in and by modern life."

—*Daily News* (New York)

"Provocative. . . . *The Boy on the Bus* is a haunting novel about parenting and closeness, recognition and identity."

—*Providence Journal*

"Schupack pulls a Henry James . . . minutely observed and subtly told."

—*New York Newsday*

"Last year, *The Lovely Bones* made us consider the horror of losing a child. This year, *The Boy on the Bus* will make us confront the terror of keeping one. [Schupack's] cool, poetic voice offers a steady flow of startling observations about marriage and parenthood. . . . From a debut this daring should rise a career of penetrating novels."

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

"Schupack's debut novel is at once familiar and eerie, like discovering a bird fluttering recklessly about your living room . . . a chillingly twisty psychological drama about love and need—one that turns on itself as seamlessly as an elegant Escher."

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—*Library Journal*

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—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Like an exurban Paul Auster, Schupack seamlessly blends the quotidian and the oblique . . . prickly and provocative, infused with ambiguity and endless seductiveness, this novel is a gem of a debut."

—Bookreporter.com

For my parents, my sisters, and my grandmother

Acknowledgments

I am enormously grateful to my editor, Amy Scheibe, and my agent, Maria Massie, for helping bring this book to life. And a million thanks to my manuscript readers for their many insights and invaluable support: Christopher Noël, Kate Walbert, Eric Zencey, Lisa Lerner, Matthew Goodman, Joy Nolan, Lisa Burdige, and William Lychack.

1

THIS RITUAL, her son coming home from school, was all wrong. It was taking too long, and now the driver was coming around the bus.

She gave a half wave from the front door. "Everything all right?" she called. "What, Sandy? What is it?"

She pulled her cardigan tighter around her and hurried down the short slate path.

Sandy Tadaveski looked over his shoulder at the bus.

"What?" she said, pushing by him. "Charlie?" she said. "Charlie!"

Meg boarded and could see instantly and with great relief that he was alive and well in the back of the bus. A sense of *right now, young man* shot through her, setting her expression, her stance. He perked up but did not leave his seat.

"Hon?" Meg started to walk down the aisle but slowed almost immediately, each step smaller than the one before.

As he shifted from distant to close, she slowed to a stop. This was not her son.

He looked quite a bit like Charlie, on the slight side for eight, with copper hair and tea-brown eyes. But there were differences: eyes narrower, more discerning than Charlie's; curls tending to kink rather than fluff; a finer nose; skin more shiny than powdery, and filling with freckles. All told, a more mature face. Fuller, firmer, more grown into itself than Charlie Carroll's pale, tentative baby face.

"Hi," the boy said, clearly delighted with her presence. He showed no sign of being home, no sign of rising, dutifully and well rehearsed, and walking directly to the front door.

She took two more steps. He looked so much like Charlie. Under ordinary circumstances, it would be their similarities that were remarkable. Now, of course, it was their differences.

She wanted to touch his face; touch seemed the only path to sense. Separated from him by half a bus, she instead gripped the top of a seat, massaging it like a shoulder. The celled green vinyl, worn and warm, felt like skin.

"Hon? Charlie?" She spoke softly. "Chappy?"

He nodded at the nickname, then, like any boy with his own mother, turned his attention out the window. His eye lit on a goose in the side yard. "There it is again!" he said. "I wonder what its name is."

When a goose began appearing on the property a few weeks ago, Charlie had asked if he could name it like a pet. His mother had explained that wild animals are not ours to keep and that, furthermore, the goose he saw around the backyard might not even be the same one all the time.

"It should probably be called something," he said to himself, thumping the seat as though to call up memory. "Something."

"Meg?" Sandy had gotten back on the bus.

"Whose idea was this, Sandy?" she said quickly, before turning to face him.

"Sometimes the route takes a little longer in mud season," he began. "But otherwise, today was the same as every other Thursday afternoon. Thirteen times we stopped, flashed the lights, halted cars if there were any, let kids run across the road to their houses. We got one horn today, one driver in a hurry. Mostly, it seems, drivers are happy to be good citizens, to make life safer for the children."

She looked from Sandy's story to the boy, to Sandy again. She waved a bent arm in front of her, like a windshield wiper. *Start over, move on. Clear the air.*

"Then we got here—last stop—and, well, this," Sandy said. He gestured to the back of the bus.

Meg instead looked ahead, into the overwide rearview mirror, row after empty row collapsed into two dimensions. She saw what Sandy must have seen when he first stopped here, the boy sitting alone in the last seat, consumed by what he was looking at, tracing an outline on the window.

She took a few steps forward, toward Sandy, although with the trick of the mirror she was also moving closer to the boy.

"What did you do?" she asked Sandy.

"I walked down the aisle, just like you did. And I said, 'Charlie?'"

Meg turned back to the boy, in living color and three dimensions.

"'Charlie?'" Now Sandy was reenacting, raising his voice to fill the present.

The boy looked up, cocking his head at the question. Not quite yes, not quite no. As though he were being addressed by a version of his name that he was not used to, or a surname instead of a first name.

"'Getting out here?'" Sandy said, still reenacting, his words more a for-the-record accounting than a question to be answered.

"Here?" the boy said, surveying out the window.

"That's just what he did the first time I asked," Sandy said to Meg. "Said 'here?' and looked out the window like that."

Sandy himself looked from window to window, as if trying to site something properly through slats. "There's something about your place," he said, "something that makes it seem like a place everyone could have, or should have, come from."

All Sandy knew was the shape of the white farmhouse, low and rambling, with its charcoal shutters and maroon front door and, halfway across the yard, an old vertical-board barn, the size of a one-car garage. She had never asked him inside, although neither had she counted on there being enough privacy outside.

"Is that real?" the boy asked. He hit the window with the heel of his hand, and the goose shook itself, water drawing

its feathers to spines. It looked like the goose was answering him, shaking its head *no*, but by shaking its head at all it was actually answering *yes*.

"Used to be something else out there," Sandy said. "When we first got here, he was looking out the window at something else."

"Just tell me," she said. She could stand no more variables, no *something else*.

"You," Sandy said. "At the front door. I kind of scolded him—'Your mother'—and then we looked back out the window and there you were, reappearing at the front door when you had been standing there only a second ago. Like a film that gets stuck showing the same frame over and over."

Meg could see it: the mother appearing . . . the mother appearing . . . the mother . . .

"I'm going to leave you two alone," Sandy said and left the bus without having stepped beyond the painted white safety stripe in front.

Meg sat in the row in front of him, facing forward. He seemed to be a good boy—*whoever he was*—and eager to please. He had fielded every question: Nothing much at school today. No, he was not cold with his jacket unzipped. The hot lunch was tuna melt. Fine, a little salty, but he liked salt.

She quickly ran out of small questions and could not yet ask the large ones, not folded like this, safe for now, her knees against the seat in front of her. She did her best to

envision a world, childish but at the same time defensible, in the topography of the seatback between her knees. She concentrated as if her life in *this* world depended on it. She imagined a forest—not very clever, she knew, since the school-bus green made the suggestion with a heavy hand. But she was pleased with the exactness of what she read in the vinyl's bumpy texture: puffs of treetops as seen from a medium distance.

She slid lower in the seat. She felt ground down, could not face the craggy intricacies of another world. She had no idea how he felt. Her mind struggled even to picture him (she would not look). She recalled this boy's argyle sweater, new to her, white- and black-threaded into shades of gray, more like something a man would wear. He might be taller than Charlie, or it might be that he was more patient.

"I made cookies this afternoon," she said, although she hadn't.

She had used cookies before as bait or balm—but by promising that she *would* make them, not lying that she already *had*.

"Chocolate chip?"

He sounded like Charlie, but a mother's mind can play tricks. If she needed to, she could extrapolate. The top of a head aisles over in the grocery store could be Jeff, even though he'd been out of town for most of the past year, and she couldn't remember when they'd last been in a grocery store together. If ever. A girl's petulant "Come on, Ma" could be Katie, even though she was away at private school. Coughing, anytime and anywhere, could be Charlie.

"No, we didn't have chips," she said, still not facing him. "Plain."

She felt him squinting at her back to get her attention. "That's okay," he said. "I like plain cookies. Remember?"

She turned around. Refracted through a meniscus of tears, he was another generation removed from familiarity. She blinked him kaleidoscopic.

"Colored sugar on top?" he tried.

She could see it in how she was seeing, the multicolored, large-granuled sugar he meant—something she never would have used, never would have had in the house. "No," she managed. "No sugar on top."

"That's okay." He shrugged, dismissing his fancy hopes. His sweater hitched at his collar.

She had to look away again.

"Colored sugar is just for decoration," he went on. "I'm sure they taste good."

"Thank you," she whispered, in case this was the scale of grace for them from now on.

She wouldn't look outside anymore, either. Dusk had gathered, as had a few neighbors, the school bus standing in their midst well past three o'clock. Debbie Palazzo had jogged past and doubled back. Her husband, Vince, probably on his way home from work, had left his car a respectful distance up the road and milled back to the bus, as had Leah Gheary. The elderly Cosgroves must have been on their twice-daily constitutional and stopped to see what the

crowd was about. And, of course, Joan Shearer was here. Hers was the only house in sight of the Landry-Carrolls', and she was always on the lookout.

A breeze? A changing of the guards, sun and moon? Something was checkering the sky in lighter and darker shades of dusk. Each time a band of light opened, Meg seemed to make out a voice.

—Is he armed or something?

The question deflated her. How bad a parent would she have to be to raise an armed eight-year-old in Birchwood, Vermont? *Whoever he was.* Her mind dragged this behind its every thought, like a banner behind a light plane.

"Well, are you?" It flew out of her mouth when she turned to him.

He reached up under his sweater. She had forgotten, even in this short time, that he was perfectly able to initiate action. With a flourish, he took a ballpoint pen from his chest pocket. "Ta-da," he said, waving it in the air. He clicked the retractable point playfully, in mock menace.

"I'll give you exactly five seconds to tell me what is going on," she said through clenched teeth. She couldn't raise her voice, not with Sandy and the neighbors right outside, so she rose herself, kneeled backward on the seat.

The boy slumped, making himself small in her shadow. "It's a pen," he said.

She grabbed it from him, threw it up the aisle. It made one angry pinprick of a noise and skidded under a seat.

He followed it with his eyes. "It has green ink," he said sadly. He went to go after it. Rather, he started to get up, but

she clamped a hand on his shoulder. She felt her fingers catch in the ball-and-socket of his joint and drew her hand away sharply.

"That's okay," he said, rubbing his shoulder. "There's cartilage in there. It protects you. We learned about it in health class. There are all kinds of things in your body that protect you." He recited some: skin, hair, fat, a very advanced nervous system.

—The father's never home.

—And the boy's sick a lot.

—He's the long-suffering silent type, that one.

—The daughter's the real firecracker.

"Do you hear people talking?" Meg asked. "Do you care what they're saying?"

"Do *you*?"

As if he had touch-tagged her, she moved across the aisle, the seat next to him. She settled into an L, her back against the window, legs stretched past the short double seat.

Perhaps like this, her feet dangling and her surety in question, *she* was the one who looked wrong. A mother who's a little off today, who has let go of the reins. Who naps in the afternoon, or lets a child stay home from school day after day. Who can sit through an entire dinner with him, an entire dinner, without saying a word. A mother who doesn't know what to do half the time, and who, in an effort to make him better, sometimes makes him worse.

"Do you really want to know?" she said.

He nodded provisionally, wanting, she could tell, to answer correctly.

"All right then." She shifted to the edge of the seat, feet on the floor, a proper strain to her back; she would fix herself-as-a-mother there, in the pull between her shoulders, in the grown-up lock of her jaw. "I do care what other people are saying, but not because I care what they think. It's just that sometimes what other people say shows a truth you cannot see yourself. Because you're always too close to your own life."

"Am I too close to my own life?" he asked.

"You," she said, "could stand to be a little closer."

In the dark, his teeth looked phosphorous, his smile Cheshire.

Heavy footsteps at the front of the bus. Meg felt a sense of impending rescue.

"Folks." Sheriff Handke, in winter-issue law-enforcement boots.

"Ben," Meg said.

"Hi," the boy said.

"What's the problem?"

"Oh, Ben." What else could she say? *This isn't my son. This is not Charlie.* Surely the sheriff would have to write up something like that, enter it into some kind of permanent record.

Ben rotated his shoulders as if to crank down his neck. He was too tall for a school bus. He turned to the boy.

"Everything okay here, son?"

"Yes," he said.

Nothing more. Meg hoped that in the presence of the sheriff, the suction of silence would draw something out of the boy, as she'd bet it could in petty crimes, shoplifting or running a red light. When consequences are in sight, guilt can get the better of people.

Meg waited for a confession, an explanation—for *anything*, really, even for Ben to articulate the question, to say, What's your name, son?—but the guiltless boy matched the adults in silence, measure for measure.

Finally Ben said, "Shouldn't you two go inside?"

"In my house? Just him and me?"

Meg stood up and, with her body, backed Ben Handke to the front of the bus. "It's hard, Ben," she said.

She wanted to go on: *He knows things. He knows things Charlie knows. He knows there's always too much sodium in the school's hot lunch. He knows about this goose he wanted to name. He knows to stay on my good side, if he can find it.*

"I know, Meg," Ben said. "But we've all got to go somewhere. And soon. It's against town ordinance to have the school bus operating outside its designated route hours."

That was the best Ben could do—an *ordinance*, nomenclature of traffic and leash laws and zoning—when an entire child was gone? Unless Ben was making this up, marking time until he could figure out the next move.

She wanted to back the sheriff, the sentinel, right off the bus and keep walking. To the house, where she would wait for Charlie. Wait better, wait harder. She would go to his

bedroom and check his equipment, the nebulizer, the inhaler, the materials he used for breathing exercises. She would make him a special meal that was high in protein *and* tasted good. She would go to the stairway and study the framed pictures, Charlie and Katie descending in age as the steps ascended.

No, she wouldn't either. More variables. It was entirely possible that she would never see again the son who picked at his eggs or cereal or protein toast in the morning before his mother took the plate away, knowing she was nourishing him all wrong. The son who spent most of his time in his room practicing his breathing or doing word searches, or who stood outside in the yard waiting for that goose when his mother insisted, finally, that he get some fresh air for a change.

Ben Handke stamped his feet, one then the other. Meg felt this in her own legs. The body of the bus connected them—the boy, too—as surely as an electric circuit.

"Well, I'll leave you two for a minute," Ben said, "but let's not take too much longer."

He climbed down the steps, footfalls palpable the length of the aisle. He stepped off the bus. Connection was lost.

The sheriff was a big man. Meg feared the school bus would levitate without him.

It did not. The bus did not lift off the ground. She did not find herself and the boy hovering above the house, asked to take celestial stock of what lay below. *Well, that's one thing to be grateful for*, she thought.

• • •