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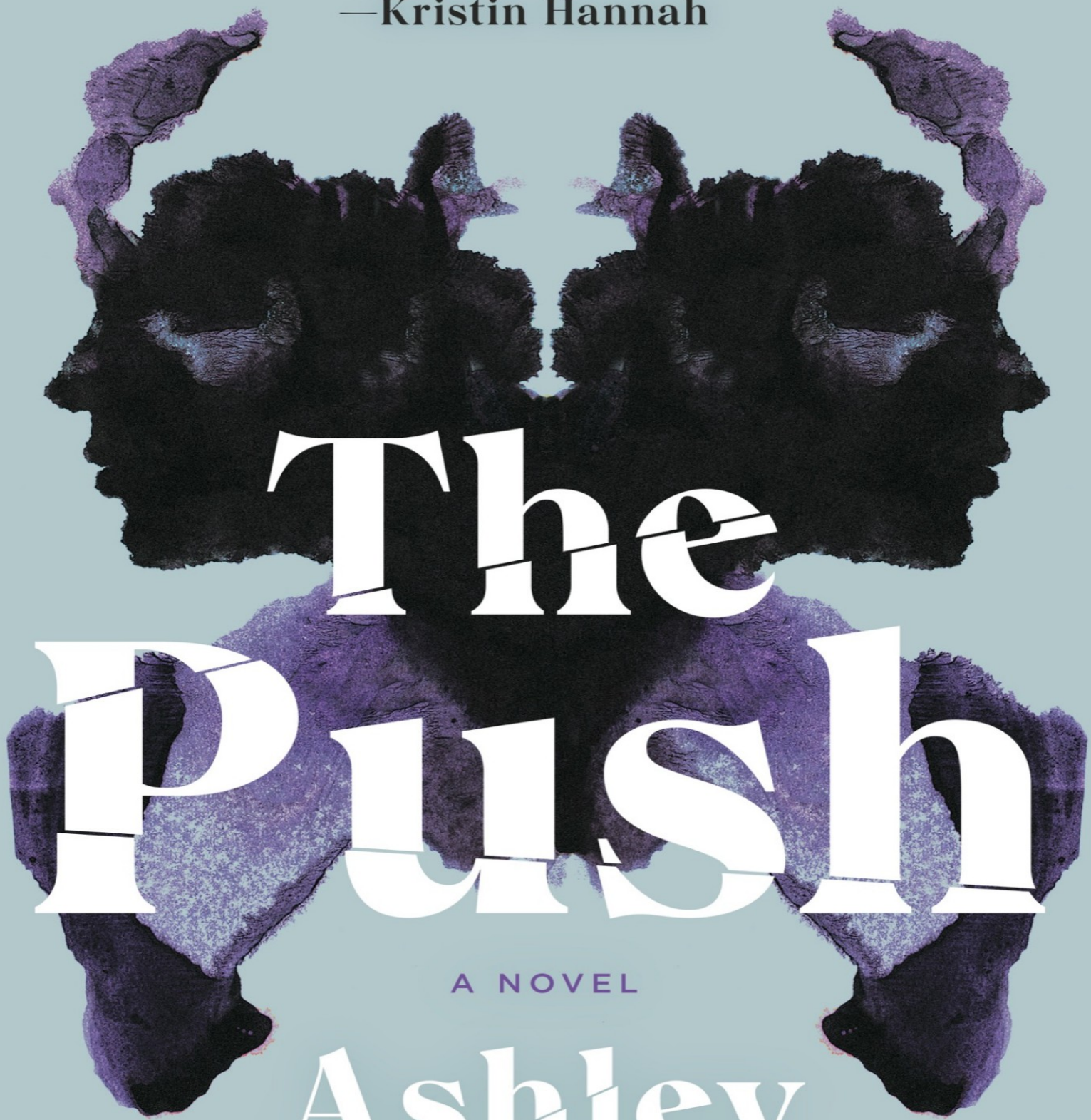

The Push

A NOVEL

Ashley Audrain

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For Oscar and Waverly

Contents

It is often said that the first sound we hear in the womb is our mother's heartbeat. Actually, the first sound to vibrate our newly developed hearing apparatus is the pulse of our mother's blood through her veins and arteries. We vibrate to that primordial rhythm even before we have ears to hear. Before we were conceived, we existed in part as an egg in our mother's ovary. All the eggs a woman will ever carry form in her ovaries while she is a four-month-old fetus in the womb of her mother. This means our cellular life as an egg begins in the womb of our grandmother. Each of us spent five months in our grandmother's womb and she in turn formed within the womb of her grandmother. We vibrate to the rhythms of our mother's blood before she herself is born. . . .

Layne Redmond, *When the Drummers Were Women*

Your house glows at night like everything inside is on fire. The drapes she chose for the windows look like linen. Expensive linen. The weave is loose enough that I can usually read your mood. I can watch the girl flip her ponytail while she finishes homework. I can watch the little boy toss tennis balls at the twelve-foot ceiling while your wife lunges around the living room in leggings, reversing the day's mess. Toys back in the basket. Pillows back on the couch.

Tonight, though, you've left the drapes open. Maybe to see the snow falling. Maybe so your daughter could look for reindeer. She's long stopped believing, but she will pretend for you. Anything for you.

You've all dressed up. The children are in matching plaid, sitting on the leather ottoman as your wife takes their picture with her phone. The girl is holding the boy's hand. You're fiddling with the record player at the back of the room and your wife is speaking to you, but you hold up a finger—you've almost got it. The girl jumps up and your wife, she sweeps up the boy, and they spin. You lift a drink, Scotch, and sip it once, twice, and slink from the record like it's a sleeping baby. That's how you always start to dance. You take him. He throws his head back. You tip him upside down. Your daughter reaches up for Daddy's kiss and your wife holds your drink for you. She sways over to the tree and adjusts a string of lights that isn't sitting quite right. And then you all stop and lean toward one another and shout something in unison, some word, perfectly timed, and then you all move again—this is a song you know well. Your wife slips out of the room and her son's face follows robotically. I remember that feeling. Of being the needed one.

Matches. She comes back to light the candles on the decorated mantel and I wonder if the snaking fir boughs are real, if they smell like the tree farm. I let myself imagine, for a moment, watching those boughs go up in flames while you all sleep tonight. I imagine the warm, butter-yellow glow of your house turning to a hot, crackling red.

The boy has picked up an iron poker and the girl gently takes it away before you or your wife notices. The good sister. The helper. The protector.

• • •

I ***don't normally watch*** for this long, but you're all so beautiful tonight and I can't bring myself to leave. The snow, the kind that sticks, the kind she'll roll into snowmen in the morning to please her little brother. I turn on my wipers, adjust the heat, and notice the clock change from 7:29 to 7:30. This is when you'd have read her *The Polar Express*.

Your wife, she's in the chair now, and she's watching the three of you bounce around the room. She laughs and collects her long, loose curls to the side. She smells your drink and puts it down. She smiles. Your back is to her so you can't see what I can, that she's holding her stomach with one hand, that she rubs herself ever so slightly and then looks down, that she's lost in the thought of what's growing inside her. They are cells. But they are everything. You turn around and her attention is pulled back to the room. To the people she loves.

She will tell you tomorrow morning.

I still know her so well.

I look down to put on my gloves. When I look back up the girl is standing at your open front door. Her face is half lit by the lantern above your house number. The plate she's holding is stacked with carrots and cookies. You'll leave crumbs on the tile floor of the foyer. You'll play along and so will she.

Now she's looking at me sitting in my car. She shivers. The dress your wife bought her is too small and I can see that her hips are growing, that her chest is blooming. With one hand she carefully pulls her ponytail over her shoulder and it's more the gesture of a woman than a girl.

For the first time in her life I think our daughter looks like me.

I put down the car window and I lift my hand, a hello, a secret hello. She places the plate at her feet and stands again to look at me before she turns around to go inside. To her family. I watch for the drapes to be yanked closed, for you to come to the door to see why the hell I am parked outside your home on a night like tonight. And

what, really, could I say? I was lonely? I missed her? I deserved to be the mother inside your glowing house?

Instead she prances back into the living room, where you've coaxed your wife from the chair. While you dance together, close, feeling up the back of her shirt, our daughter takes the boy's hand and leads him to the center of the living-room window. An actor hitting her mark on the stage. They were framed so precisely.

He looks just like Sam. He has his eyes. And that wave of dark hair that ends in a curl, the curl I wrapped around my finger over and over again.

I feel sick.

Our daughter is staring out the window looking at me, her hands on your son's shoulders. She bends down and kisses him on the cheek. And then again. And then again. The boy likes the affection. He is used to it. He is pointing to the falling snow but she won't look away from me. She rubs the tops of his arms as though she's warming him up. Like a mother would do.

You come to the window and kneel down to the boy's level. You look out and then you look up. My car doesn't catch your eye. You point to the snowflakes like your son, and you trace a path across the sky with your finger. You're talking about the sleigh. About the reindeer. He's searching the night, trying to see what you see. You flick him playfully under the chin. Her eyes are still fixed on me. I find myself sitting back in my seat. I swallow and finally look away from her. She always wins.

When I look back she's still there, watching my car.

I think she might reach for the curtain, but she doesn't. My eyes don't leave her this time. I pick up the thick stack of paper beside me on the passenger seat and feel the weight of my words.

I've come here to give this to you.

This is my side of the story.

1

You slid your chair over and tapped my textbook with the end of your pencil and I stared at the page, hesitant to look up. "Hello?" I had answered you like a phone call. This made you laugh. And so we sat there, giggling, two strangers in a school library, studying for the same elective subject. There must have been hundreds of students in the class—I had never seen you before. The curls in your hair fell over your eyes and you twirled them with your pencil. You had such a peculiar name. You walked me home later in the afternoon and we were quiet with each other. You didn't hide how smitten you were, smiling right at me every so often; I looked away each time. I had never experienced attention like that from anyone before. You kissed my hand outside my dorm and this made us laugh all over again.

• • •

Soon we were twenty-one and we were inseparable. We had less than a year left until we graduated. We spent it sleeping together in my raft of a dorm bed, and studying at opposite ends of the couch with our legs intertwined. We'd go out to the bar with your friends, but we always ended up home early, in bed, in the novelty of each other's warmth. I barely drank, and you'd had enough of the party scene—you wanted only me. Nobody in my world seemed to mind much. I had a small circle of friends who were more like acquaintances. I was so focused on maintaining my grades for my scholarship that I didn't have the time or the interest for a typical

college social life. I suppose I hadn't grown very close to anyone in those years, not until I met you. You offered me something different. We slipped out of the social orbit and were happily all each other needed.

The comfort I found in you was consuming—I had nothing when I met you, and so you effortlessly became my everything. This didn't mean you weren't worthy of it—you were. You were gentle and thoughtful and supportive. You were the first person I'd told that I wanted to be a writer, and you replied, "I can't imagine you being anyone else." I reveled in the way girls looked at us, like they had something to be jealous about. I smelled your head of waxy dark hair while you slept at night and traced the line of your fuzzy jaw to wake you up in the morning. You were an addiction.

For my birthday, you wrote down one hundred things you loved about me. *14. I love that you snore a little bit right when you fall asleep. 27. I love the beautiful way you write. 39. I love tracing my name on your back. 59. I love sharing a muffin with you on the way to class. 72. I love the mood you wake up in on Sundays. 80. I love watching you finish a good book and then hold it to your chest at the end. 92. I love what a good mother you'll be one day.*

"Why do you think I'll be a good mother?" I put down the list and felt for a moment like maybe you didn't know me at all.

"Why wouldn't you be a good mother?" You poked me playfully in the belly. "You're caring. And sweet. I can't wait to have little babies with you."

There was nothing to do but force myself to smile.

I'd never met someone with a heart as eager as yours.

• • •

One day you'll understand, Blythe. The women in this family . . . we're different."

I can still see my mother's tangerine lipstick on the cigarette filter. The ash falling into the cup, swimming in the last sip of my orange juice. The smell of my burnt toast.

You asked about my mother, Cecilia, only on a few occasions. I told you only the facts: (1) she left when I was eleven years old, (2) I only ever saw her twice after that, and (3) I had no idea where she was.

You knew I was holding back more, but you never pressed—you were scared of what you might hear. I understood. We're all entitled to have certain expectations of each other and of ourselves. Motherhood is no different. We all expect to have, and to marry, and to be, good mothers.

1939–1958

Etta was born on the very same day World War II began. She had eyes like the Atlantic Ocean and was red-faced and pudgy from the beginning.

She fell in love with the first boy she ever met, the town doctor's son. His name was Louis, and he was polite and well spoken, not common among the boys she knew, and he wasn't the type to care that Etta hadn't been born with the luck of good looks. Louis walked Etta to school with one hand behind his back, from their very first day of school to their last. And Etta was charmed by things like that.

Her family owned hundreds of acres of cornfields. When Etta turned eighteen and told her father she wanted to marry Louis, he insisted his new son-in-law had to learn how to farm. He had no sons of his own, and he wanted Louis to take over the family business. But Etta thought her father just wanted to prove a point to the young man: farming was hard and respectable work. It wasn't for the weak. And it certainly wasn't for an intellectual. Etta had chosen someone who was nothing like her father.

Louis had planned to be a doctor like his own father was, and had a scholarship waiting for medical school. But he wanted Etta's hand in marriage more than he wanted a medical license. Despite Etta's pleas to take it easy on him, her father worked Louis to the bone. He was up at four o'clock every morning and out into the dewy fields. Four in the morning until dusk, and as Etta liked to remind people, he never complained once. Louis sold the medical bag and textbooks that his own father had passed down to him, and he put the money in a jar on their kitchen counter. He told Etta it was the start of a college fund for their future children. Etta thought this said a lot about the selfless kind of man he was.

One fall day, before the sun rose, Louis was severed by the beater on a silage wagon. He bled to death, alone in the cornfield. Etta's father found him and sent her to cover up the body with a tarp from

the barn. She carried Louis's mangled leg back to the farmhouse and threw it at her father's head while he was filling a bucket of water meant to wash away the blood on the wagon.

She hadn't told her family yet about the child growing inside her. She was a big woman, seventy pounds overweight, and hid the pregnancy well. The baby girl, Cecilia, was born four months later on the kitchen floor in the middle of a snowstorm. Etta stared at the jar of money on the counter above her while she pushed the baby out.

Etta and Cecilia lived quietly at the farmhouse and rarely ventured into town. When they did, it wasn't hard to hear everyone's whispers about the woman who "suffered from the nerves." In those days, not much more was said—not much more was suspected. Louis's father gave Etta's mother a regular supply of sedatives to give to Etta as she saw fit. And so Etta spent most days in the small brass bed in the room she grew up in and her mother took care of Cecilia.

But Etta soon realized she would never meet another man lying doped up like that in bed. She learned to function well enough and eventually started to take care of Cecilia, pushing her around town in the stroller while the poor girl screamed for her grandmother. Etta told people she'd been plagued with a terrible chronic stomach pain, that she couldn't eat for months on end, and that's how she'd got so thin. Nobody believed this, but Etta didn't care about their lazy gossip. She had just met Henry.

Henry was new to town and they went to the same church. He managed a staff of sixty people at a candy manufacturing plant. He was sweet to Etta from the minute they met—he loved babies and Cecilia was particularly cute, so she turned out not to be the problem everyone said she'd be.

Before long, Henry bought them a Tudor-style house with mint-green trim in the middle of town. Etta left the brass bed for good and gained back all the weight she'd lost. She threw herself into making a home for her family. There was a well-built porch with a swing, lace curtains on every window, and chocolate chip cookies always in the oven. One day their new living-room furniture was delivered to the wrong house, and the neighbor let the delivery man set it all up in her basement even though she hadn't ordered it. When Etta caught wind of this, she ran down the street after the

truck, yelling profanity in her housecoat and curlers. This gave everyone a good laugh, including, eventually, Etta.

She tried very hard to be the woman she was expected to be.

A good wife. A good mother.

Everything seemed like it would be just fine.