

*Excerpt from "White People" by Allan Gurganus*

(background: the boy's younger brother has been stung by bees and he's allergic)

Our house's outer walls were very thick. Quilted silver stuffing sandwiched between well-made slats. Each joint and corner carpentered to keep out weather, pollen, noise, and moths that make lace of adult tweeds.

But walls inside, ones that showed where rooms would start and stop, these divided only space from space, us from us, and were appropriately flimsy. So after midnight, when outdoor birds and insects settled into thin brief sleep, when the chugging laundry room and Mother's wailing hair dryer and Father's baritone electric razor rested, as I hid chin-deep under quilts and printed trains, my brother's troubled breathing lifted up out of the darkness. It stayed the leading sound all night as I lay listening.

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From under the covers, his swollen hands lifted. Ten white fingers stubby as toes stopped inches beyond either cheek. *This* big. Above quilts, a head large as Father's, features creased within deep folds. His rounded face and neck gave off a sheen in this blue light, looked brittle as some vase propped among the pillows. I thought of a piñata we'd ceremoniously shattered at school. A painted ramp, papier-mâché. Its belly dented, then cracked jaggedly, and out like gore leapt candy, trinkets, drenching other kids who laughed and jigged under this downpour. I hid behind my desk.

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He hissed. That hand slowly pulled away from me. It fisted and slipped under the coverlets. I hadn't meant to hurt him. I backed toward the door. But just then his face did something, jack-o-lantern slits widened. I'm sure he hoped to make me feel better. I went over and leaned across his bed, looked eye-to-eye right at him. The puckered folds all stretched, tightening.

"You're smiling, aren't you?"

He nodded, still doing it.