

Face

by David Galef

Alex's eyes are the brown of the UPS trucks that deliver to the kind of neighborhood his family doesn't live in, places like Kew Gardens and Forest Hills, not Corona. A teacher of his once called that kind of brown loam-colored, whatever loam is. But the shade can darken, depending on whether he's looking at you with a soft gaze or a hard stare. Lately he's been experimenting with something in the middle, a curious look that girls seem to like.

His hair's a home for pigeons, as his mother says, running her bony fingers through the dirty brown thatch, sighing as if God himself could never cut it. Five years ago, when he was in fifth grade, she dragged him to Dale's Barber Shop on Martense Avenue and paid for a job that made his head look like a bowling ball with fringe. He still brings that up when going against his mother's suggestions.

He pats himself into place and watches the hair spring back. Should he have gotten a trim for tonight? Too late now. Anyway, some girls think messy is sexy. The way they eye you. When Mercedes held his gaze outside the bodega for five, six, seven seconds, he knew she'd go out with him.

The nose: standard family issue, nostrils flared like Mustang exhaust pipes, with a lot of honking during allergy season. His sister, Sofia, has it, too. Mom buys tissue packets by the case and presses them on the kids as they leave for school.

If his mouth could only be wider, fuller – but it's more like a geometry lesson showing that two parallel lines never meet. A scene with his father over his allowance makes his lips compress so it looks as if the slot will never open again and they'll have to feed him tonight's spaghetti through an IV tube. Which reminds him, he'd better borrow some money from his sister if he wants to take Mercedes to Ostra's, which is sort of a bar and kind of a disco. Of course, they might get proofed, in which case he should have a ditch plan.

So his ears stick out, okay? But not like dish antennae and not like that kid in seventh grade everyone called Dumbo. They're more like airplane flaps. They

don't seem to make him hear better.

His facial hair's average for a fifteen-year-old, which is to say a five-day scruff that takes him two weeks to gather, despite his mother's humming "Shave and a haircut, two bits" at the breakfast table. But then he brings up the Awful Haircut Incident.

His chin has almost, not quite, maybe if he frowns sideways, the hint of a cleft, like the kind Cary Grant had, whoever he was. Grandpa told him that. But thank God it's not a butt chin. And anyway, when the hell's a guy's chin ever got him any action?

Two pimples, really just one and a half after squeezing the one on his right cheek. The patch of acne cleared up after using that tube of prescription cream they got him at CVS. Should've bought a condom three-pack there. Just in case.

Sofia, two years older than him and an authority on sex, claims he has killer eyelashes. Is that what it takes? He blinks slowly. Smiles. Maybe she's right. He turns away from the all-seeing mirror. An hour later, he's at the corner of Corona and 51st, near the park. Touching his face, checking out the crowd, waiting, pursing his lips, patting down his scruff, waiting, blowing his nose, scratching his chin, waiting some more.

Mercedes arrives at 8:15, just late enough to have made Alex nervous. Scoop tank and oh-so-tight jeans. Her dark liquid hair spills down her back. Wonder how long it took *her* to get ready? She bends toward him, strokes his arm, and tells him he looks *sooo* cute. His ears tingle. His eyes widen. His nostrils flare.

That night at ten, wobbly drunk at Ostra's, he tightwalks into the men's room and checks out his face, pocked all over with invisible kisses. His hair is all mussed and not by him. This is shaping into one hell of an evening. He grins and grins.

Ten years later, as he looks in the bathroom mirror, hair still mussy, but skin cleared up, he wonders what happened to Mercedes. He still recalls the touch of her lips. He runs a hand through his hair, rubs his scruff. Tries out a grin or two. He glances down at Angelina's toothbrush next to his on the sink. Hears their kid, Jeffrey, asking for cereal in the kitchen. *Well, what happened to you, lover boy?* he asks himself. He's still kinda cute — someone at work at actually told him that yesterday — but it's too late for him to do anything about it. ■

