From “Nilda,” by Junot Diaz  
*Drown* (Riverhead Trade 1997)

Nilda was my brother’s girlfriend.  
This is how all these stories begin.  
She was Dominican from here and had superlong hair, like those Pentecostal girls, and a chest you wouldn’t believe—I’m talking world-class. Rafa would sneak her down into our basement bedroom after our mother went to bed and do her to whatever was on the radio right then. The two of them had to let me stay, because if my mother heard me upstairs on the couch everybody’s ass would have been fried. And since I wasn’t about to spend my night out in the bushes this is how it was.

Rafa didn’t make no noise, just a low something that resembled breathing. Nilda was the one. She seemed to be trying to hold back from crying the whole time. It was crazy hearing her like that. The Nilda I’d grown up with was one of the quietest girls you’d ever meet. She let her hair wall away her face and read “The New Mutants,” and the only time she looked straight at anything was when she looked out a window.

But that was before she’d gotten that chest, before that slash of black hair had gone from something to pull on the bus to something to stroke in the dark. The new Nilda wore stretch pants and Iron Maiden shirts; she had already run away from her mother’s and ended up at a group home; she’d already slept with Tono and Nestor and Little Anthony from Parkwood, older guys. She crashed over at our apartment a lot because she hated her moms, who was the neighborhood borracha. In the morning she slipped out before my mother woke up and found her. Waited for heads at the bus stop, fronted like she’d come from her own place, same clothes as the day before and greasy hair so everybody thought her a skank. Waited for my brother and didn’t talk to anybody and nobody talked to her, because she’d always been one of those quiet, semi-retarded girls who you couldn’t talk to without being dragged into a whirlpool of dumb stories. If Rafa decided that he wasn’t going to school, then she’d wait near our apartment until my mother left for work. Sometimes he slept late and she’d wait across the street, building letters out of pebbles until she saw him crossing the living room.
She had big stupid lips and a sad moonface and the driest skin. Always rubbing lotion on it and cursing the moreno father who’d given it to her.

It seemed like she was always waiting for my brother. Nights, she’d knock and I’d let her in and we’d sit on the couch while Rafa was off at his job at the carpet factory or working out at the gym. I’d show her my newest comics and she’d read them real close, but as soon as Rafa showed up she’d throw them in my lap and jump into his arms.

I missed you, she’d say in a little-girl voice, and Rafa would laugh. You should have seen him in those days: he had the face bones of a saint. Then Mami’s door would open and Rafa would detach himself and cowboy-saunter over to Mami, and say, You got something for me to eat, vieja? Claro que si, Mami’d say, trying to put her glasses on.

He had us all, the way only a pretty nigger can.

Once when Rafa was late from the job and we were alone in the apartment a long time, I asked her about the group home. It was three weeks before the end of the school year and everybody had entered the Do-Nothing Stage. I was fourteen and reading “Dhalgren” for the second time; I had an IQ that would have broken you in two, but I would have traded it in for a halfway decent face in a second.

It was pretty cool up there, she said. She was pulling on the front of her halter top, trying to air her chest out. The food was bad, but there were a lot of cute guys in the house with me. They all wanted me.

She started chewing on a nail. Even the guys who worked there were calling me after I left, she said.

The only reason Rafa went after her was because his last full-time girlfriend had gone back to Guyana—she was this dougla girl with a single eyebrow and skin to die for—and because Nilda had pushed up to him. She’d been back from the group home only a couple of months, but by then she’d already gotten a rep as a cuero. A lot of the Dominican girls in town were on some serious lockdown—we saw them on the bus and at school and maybe at the Pathmark, but since most families knew exactly what kind of tigueres were roaming the neighborhood these girls weren’t allowed to hang out. Nilda was different. She was brown trash. Her moms was a mean-ass drunk and always running around South Amboy with her white boyfriends—which is a long way of saying Nilda could hang and man, did she ever.
Exercise: Key Points

- This **first-person PN uses an informal and conversational tone**. If you have fun or colorful language that’s specific to a time or place, go for it. If not, that’s fine. The most important aspect of this narrator is the way he “talks” as if he’s walking arm-in-arm with you down the street, talking your ear off. He’s caught your attention and won’t give it up.

- Create a **talkative first-person persona-narrator** who describes a setting or world that he or she is very much a part of. Have your PN reveal his / her world to the reader by **focusing on a character** that stands in for the rest of this world. The way your narrator talks about this character is a way for the narrator to reveal him/herself: personality, attitude and background.

- Your PN is a bit of a **show-off, with a lot of energy**. Your PN should be able to “tell it like it is,” but without self-pity.

N.B.: Diaz has said that this is the first time he was able to write about his brother, who died of cancer. Do you see the distance he achieves by focusing on Nilda?