

Dear Celia C. Pérez,

In the 1970s, a Korean boy was born in Illinois, USA. A couple of years later, a girl was born in Seoul, South Korea. The two met, got married, and later, a baby was born in Chicago. That was me.

I am Korean American.

It has never been something that I was ashamed of. Unlike the characters in many books that I have read, I don't feel any less American. I am proud of my culture and its traditions. However, it doesn't always feel like *my* culture.

I am Korean, but I don't feel Korean enough.

I constantly felt judged by people who were more connected to their culture than myself. Always fearing the dreaded, "Do you speak another language?" and having to shamefully shake my head no. Avoiding saying Korean words for fear of mispronouncing them, flinching at any mention of the word "Korean." I was slowly turning away from my culture.

When I first read *The First Rule of Punk* in 2019, I didn't think anything of it. I didn't make a groundbreaking discovery, reach an enlightening conclusion, or undergo some extreme transformation. The novel wasn't something that I could connect with on a deep, personal level. At least, not yet.

It took me about a year to start truly thinking about my feelings about my culture. Was I embarrassed? Had I been shying away from my culture because I didn't want to feel criticized for not knowing "enough"?

At the beginning of *The First Rule of Punk*, Malú doesn't feel very connected to her culture. As the plot develops, she learns more about what it means to be Mexican and embraces it. She even sings an entire song in Spanish --- something I wouldn't ever dare to do.

What about me? I didn't know much about Korean culture or history, and I couldn't even speak the language. I was barely Korean anymore. A part of me wanted this to happen. The less Korean I acted, the less people would expect of me, and the less humiliation I would feel. But a part of me was ashamed that I wasn't even *trying* to repair the damage I had done to the relationship I had with my culture.

"The only failure is not to try," as George Clooney says. And he was right: I was failing. I was failing my family, my culture, and myself. There was only one way I could fix this.

In the winter of 2020, I started meeting with my grandmother on the weekends to learn Korean. I probably looked like an idiot, and sometimes I felt the part too, but at least I was trying, and that was what mattered.

I felt like a baby learning to walk. They waddle, and fall, get back up and keep trying, all while keeping a goofy smile on their face. I was proud, for the first time in a long time.

The First Rule of Punk was a wake-up call for me. Without it to spark my journey of connecting to my culture, who knows where I might have ended up. Most likely, still scared and afraid of nothing. *I* would be the only thing holding me back.

Ms. Pérez, thank you for writing this book. Thank you for teaching me to love my culture, to hold it tight, and to never lose sight of it. Thank you for teaching me to try. I still don't know much Korean, but the important thing is that I won't ever stop trying.

I never knew that a book could mean so much to me. Yet, here I am.

In the words of M.F. Moonzajer, "My culture is my identity and personality. It gives me spiritual, intellectual, and emotional distinction from others, and *I am proud of it.*"

Yours truly,
Ellie Kim
