

## Lori Ostlund

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an excerpt of

### *Dr. Deneau's Punishment*

**D**R. Dunno. That is what the boys call me, what they write on desks and in bathroom stalls, a play on my name—which is Deneau—and on the fact that, day after day, that is how they respond to my questions. “Dunno,” they say with an elaborate shrug and the limp, unarticulated drawl that has become ubiquitous among teenagers in a classroom setting; they cannot even be bothered to claim their ignorance in the form of a complete sentence, to say, “I don’t know”—a less-than-desirable response, to be sure, but one that does not smack of apathy and laziness and disdain.

They arrive each day with matted hair and soiled faces, a lifetime of wax and dirt spilling from their ears. “Ear rice,” the Koreans call it, referring, no doubt, to the tiny balls that a normal person, one who attends to his ears on a regular basis, is likely to produce—not to the prodigious amounts produced by thirteen-year-old boys oblivious to hygiene. However, I cannot sit beside them each morning as they prepare for school, coaxing them to apply just a bit more soap, to consider a cleaner shirt. No. My realm is the classroom, my only concern that when they leave it they possess at least a modicum of proficiency in that much-maligned subject to which I have devoted my life: mathematics.

Would it surprise you to know that I have students who do not understand the concept of 10—who, when given the task of adding some multiple of 10 to a number ending in, let us say, 4, cannot predict that the sum will also end in 4? This, of course, suggests a much bigger problem—an ignorance of zero itself. The Romans developed no concept of zero, and we see where that got them: the Roman numeral system, with all its past glory, relegated to the role of place holder in complex outlines and on the faces of clocks.

“Imagine your lives without zero,” I once challenged my students in a moment of folly, thinking that I was offering inspiration, a new window onto the world. They stared back at me blandly, no doubt wondering what zero could possibly have to do with eating and sleeping and unabated nose picking.

“You mean like sports?” said James Nyquist. I had not meant sports, for sports is a topic to which I never allude.

“Kindly elaborate, Mr. Nyquist. I have yet to see your point.”

“Like in the beginning when no one’s scored,” he said.

“Yes,” I said, and then, more forcefully, “Yes!”—for I meant precisely this.

“We’d just start at one, I guess.”

“One?” I repeated. “But one implies that you’ve already scored.”

“You said to imagine our lives without zero,” he pointed out. “That means it doesn’t exist, right? And if both sides start at one, it’s the same as starting at zero.”

It was as though I had eliminated Pringles from their lives. Fine, they would eat Ruffles instead. That easily was zero dispensed with.