

The First Step: A Peace Story

By Peggy Dymond Leavey



"We're having a math test this morning," Ms. Wilkins announces. It is the first day of April.

"Clear your desks, please, grade sixes." With that, she releases the map that covers the blackboard, letting it snap up on its roller to the top.

And there it is—the whole board, filled with math questions.

As usual, Eric is the first to object. "But that's not fair!" he cries. "We didn't have a chance to study!"

Then more of us join the protest. "You didn't tell us!"

"Don't we always review before a test?" I ask, as politely as I can.

"You've got to keep up, Kayla," Ms. Wilkins replies. "You should be going over your work every night."

"All right class," the teacher continues, passing out blank sheets of paper. "You have till the recess bell. Start now, please."

There is a lot of shuffling of feet and grumbling, and from across the room, I hear the nervous tapping of Resi's pencil. Resi's marks are usually the best in the class, and she gets very upset when there isn't enough time to study.

For five long minutes we struggle with the work on the board. Then suddenly, Ms. Wilkins cries, "April Fool's!"

There is absolute silence. Can this be true?

After a moment, Alyssa pipes up, "You mean, we don't have to do the test?"

"That's exactly what I mean." Wearing a big smile, Ms. Wilkins picks up the blackboard brush and wipes out all the math questions.

Resi drops her pencil and rests her head on her arms.

"Did everyone forget what day this is?" Ms. Wilkins teases.

Her joke has worked—we've all been fooled. But to me, it doesn't feel right.

I'm not the only one. At recess, instead of breaking off into our usual groups, we all stand outside the back door, muttering.

"That wasn't funny," Ivy declares.

"We ought to pull an April Fool's joke on her," Eric suggests. "See how she likes it."

He pumps the air with his fist. "I know! When the bell rings, we'll all just ignore it. We'll just wait till she comes out to see where we are, and then we'll all yell, 'April Fool's!'"

The idea of getting even with Ms. Wilkins appeals to everyone. No one suggests it isn't a good plan. No one mentions that the teacher was just trying to have fun.

At 10:30 the bell rings and everyone hurries toward the school. Everyone except Ms. Wilkins' grade six class. We all turn our backs and stroll toward the opposite end of the schoolyard.

Ivy's little brother, Carl, comes barrelling down the slope after us. "Where are you guys going?" he cries, his small face worried. "Come on Ivy, hurry up. You're going to be late!"

Gently, his sister turns him around. "Never mind," Ivy says. "You go in, Carlie. There's something we have to do."

Then, we all stand along the fence and wait for Ms. Wilkins to appear.

But it is Mr. Fernley, the principal, who strides out to the edge of the pavement. He waves his arms and shouts at us to return to school immediately.



Ms. Wilkins waits just inside the door. The school secretary and the vice-principal are waiting too, arms folded across their chests, looking very serious.

"April Fool's," we echo meekly, as we troop inside.

Mr. Fernley is furious. "No recess for the rest of the month," he sputters. "And that goes for all of you!"

"It was an April Fool's joke," Eric points out.

"Not in *this* school," growls Mr. Fernley.

Ms. Wilkins looks as if she agrees with the principal. Has she forgotten? Why hasn't she told Mr. Fernley about the trick she played on us?

"Taking away recess isn't fair," we complain, when we are back in the classroom.

"Mr. Fernley is the principal," is all Ms. Wilkins has to say.

"You could talk to him," Alyssa suggests. "Couldn't you?"

"Sit down please, class. We've already lost a quarter of an hour."

Just before lunchtime, Ms. Wilkins gets buzzed down to the office. She leaves, with instructions for us to sit quietly in our seats until the bell rings.

"I bet she's in big trouble," Ivy predicts, darkly.

"So what?" asks Ryan. "She started it." He balls up a wad of paper and fires it at the wastepaper basket. It misses and lands on the teacher's desk. When he goes to retrieve it, he picks up something else from the desk.

"Hey, look!" he cries, waving the teacher's bottle of water over his head. "Let's dump this out, and she'll think she drank it already. Maybe she'll think she's going crazy."

No one tells him to sit down and forget about it. No one suggests his plan will not make things any better.

"Toss it here," says Eric. "I'll drink it."

He leaps to his feet, catching the bottle just as Ms. Wilkins comes through the door.

After that, things get much worse.

Ms. Wilkins totally misunderstands the boys' intentions. She accuses them of planning to tamper with the water. We try to tell her she's wrong, but she won't listen.

"Don't you realize that if you'd put something in that water I might have gotten sick?" she demands. "I might even have died!" And to our horror, she bursts into tears and runs from the room. Whatever happened in the office, I decide, must have been pretty bad.

A grim-faced Mr. Fernley takes over our afternoon classes. Eric's and Ryan's parents are called, and the boys are sent home.

As we leave school that afternoon we can talk about nothing else. We haven't had this much excitement since Atoub fell off the monkey bars last year and broke his arm.

Someone suggests Ms. Wilkins might quit or even be fired. Although I don't tell anyone, I find myself feeling sorry for her. This is Ms. Wilkins' first year of teaching, and she has a way of making even the hard stuff fun. It is Ms. Wilkins' interesting ideas that make other kids wish they were in our class.

But no one says anything about that.

As soon as I get home, the phone starts ringing. Everyone, even my friends from other grades, wants to know what happened in Ms. Wilkins' class. We are the talk of the school.

I tell my parents about it while we eat supper that evening, between phone calls.

"Hang on a minute," Dad says, passing me the green beans. "How could one poorly thought out April Fool's joke snowball like this, so that two students are suspended from school, and the teacher practically has a nervous breakdown?"

"Don't forget about losing recess," I remind him.

Mom sets the potatoes on the table and sits down. "I think this has gotten out of hand," she says quietly.

"I know," I agree. "But what can we do about it? It's like we're in this war now."

The phone rings again, and my brother Michael answers it. "It's for you, Kayla," he says. "It's Alyssa."

"Tell her I'll call her back," I decide. "I don't really feel like discussing this anymore."

"Maybe that's your answer," suggests Dad.

"You mean, I should just stop talking about it?"

"It's a good place to start."

"Oh, I get it." I nod slowly. "If I stop talking about it, my friends will too."

"Someone has to take the first step," Dad agrees.

"But Ms. Wilkins was the one who started it," Michael says, scowling.

"Someone has to take the first step toward ending it," I remind him. "Why shouldn't that someone be me?"

By the time I get to school in the morning I know what the next step will be.

Ms. Wilkins is outside on yard duty. She walks slowly through the playground, looking here and there, trailing a group of little kids, all eager to hold her hand. The teacher stops when she sees me. The little kids stop too.

"Ms. Wilkins," I begin, "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry about what we did yesterday."

"Thank you, Kayla," Ms. Wilkins says. "You know, I'm sorry too." She smiles, and the little kids crowd around us, wanting to hear.

"I'm glad you came to talk to me, Kayla. I have an idea for a class project, and I was wondering who might help me with it.

"I'm thinking of a big banner—a peace banner—to hang at the back of the classroom, something everyone will want to work on."

"I'd really like to help," I tell her. "Can we start today?"

"I can't think of a better time for it," Ms. Wilkins agrees.

The End

About the Author

Peggy Dymond Leavey is a writer and retired librarian. Her latest book for children is *The Path through the Trees* (Napoleon Press). She is a member of Carrying Place (ON) United Church.

Activity Idea

What do you think the peace banner Kayla and her teacher worked on looked like? Try making your own peace banner.