

**First Short Story of Clare Dinnocenti  
Circa 1976**

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***THE DARE***

by

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Well her back yard bumps right up against my back yard and you know, she was born just six months after I was born. Well, we been livin' in these same houses all those years and we're nine now--so that means we gotta be good friends--don't it?

I can just tell you're confused and you probably think I talk too much--everybody says I do. My name is Lorrie, Lorrie Hardy. Well, I'd like my name to be Lorrie, but people call me Laura. Pooh, what a lousy name! My daddy heard some dumb song or somethin' and thought that a pretty little girl oughta be named Laura. Dumb huh?

I have two big brothers, two big sisters and two little brothers. My biggest brother is a soldier and he fights the "japs" in lots of battles over in the "filpeans". He's terrific! My other big brother is the toughest guy in his

gang, he's Butch, and he's really neat. I like to peek at 'im when he gets dressed; he's different from my little brothers. My sister says that's bad-- what does she know?

Well, I wanta tell you about her, my so-called best friend. She's Tina, Tina Harris, and she's a show-off. Like I said, Tina lives in back of me. She has a funny house--there's three big houses all slammed together and Tina lives in one end. My yard is so big that all three o' 'em houses' yards touch mine and I have friends livin' in all three of 'em, but Tina is the only show-off.

She called me over to the fence near the slop pile one day. The slop pile is in our yard and they wanted my daddy to get rid of it, but they got an old outhouse right near it and my daddy said, "When you get rid of that outhouse, I'll get rid of the slop pile." Anyways, Tina called me and said, "Laura, you just never will guess what my daddy made for me." She always used more words 'n she needed like that. But, 'o course I couldn't guess what her daddy made her--her daddy spoilt her rotten. Why he even bought 'em a TV set. Can you 'magine that? There just ain't many people with a TV set, but Tina and her sister wanted one, so her daddy went right out and bought one.

Well, she sassied over to the fence and says, "My daddy just finished making Joanie and me a pair of stilts." Joanie, that's Tina's sister and I like her a whole lot more'n Tina--she's not always braggin' about everythin'. Stilts. I didn't know anythin' 'bout stilts, but I wouldn't let ole Tina know that.

"That's neat Tina, can I see 'em?" I said, real friendly and happy like that, but I was just as mad as could be. These daddies that do all these things for their kids--set me to wonderin' how they 'spect those kids'll grow up 'n take care of 'emselves.

They were nice stilts, I guess--never did see a pair o' stilts till that day. They were two long wooden sticks that went up over your head and then there was two wooden blocks for puttin' your feet on--you could wear 'em like a pair o' shoes and you could get two feet higher that way.

But then ole moonface Tina says, "And nobody but Joanie and me can play with them." Just like 'er, goin' around asking you to look at her stuff, but you ain't never allowed to touch it. You know, I b'en her best friend for nine years and I ain't never b'en allowed in her house. Her mommy kept that house all clean and pretty 'n she says, "Tina, don't let those dirty kids in here." Yep, Tina's mommy called us the dirty kids. 'Course we was just as clean as Mama could make us, but somehow we never did look as fine and nice as Tina 'n her sister. Tina's mommy sure did make 'er look real pretty.

Sometimes the guys 'n me would be playin' ball 'n Tina would be all dolled up like Shirley Temple 'n we'd say, "C'mon 'n play Tina," but she just stood there like a package all ready for Christmas mornin'. An' during our war games when Tina'd get shot she'd go home a cryin' to her mommy. We called 'er "Boo Boo" 'cause she cried all the time. She hated to be called "Boo Boo"--even though she deserved it. Then she'd get real mad at me 'n say, "Laura Hardy, you are a tomboy, when are you ever gonna grow up and be a lady." Then Tina 'n me would be mad for a coupla hours but somethin' would always happen to make us talk again.

That day, the stilts day, we went over to set on Tina's stoop 'n we were wonderin' what to do 'bout walkin' on 'em when Victor came along. Victor Forchino's my buddy--we call him "Wappo". He's Italian 'n his daddy has a big construction business 'n Victor's gonna be a inventor some day. 'Course, I get really steamed at "Wappo" sometimes, he changes all the rules of the games when he ain't winnin'. Anyways, "Wappo" came walkin' up wearin' the same old Philadelphia Athletics sweatshirt 'n hat he always wore. His dad knows Connie Mack 'n Victor even met 'im once. I don't know what kinda smell "Wappo" had on his clothes--my big sister said he smelled like a 'grease and garlic sandwich', but I asked 'im if he ever ate 'em and he said there ain't no such thing.

"What you guys doin'?" he asked.

"We're not doing anything, Victor," said Tina in her special voice.

"Tina's daddy made 'er these stilts," I said, "but he didn't teach 'er how to use 'em yet."

"Stilts are easy to use. Just watch."

"Oh" I said "No one but Tina 'n Joanie is allowed to use 'em."

"I suppose Victor could use them if he knows how." says Tina using that "cupie-doll" voice.

Good old Tina, 'I suppose Victor could use them.' Yech! she just butters up to him 'cause her mommy 'n daddy know he's rich. Her mommy's nice as a lollipop to Victor, but when my brother Butch 'n me come around she tells us not to walk on the grass--it's OK for Victor to walk on the dumb grass.

Wappo did good on the stilts 'n it looked just as easy as pie. I wanted so bad to try it, but I knew Tina wouldn't let me. Besides, she 'n Wappo were gettin' real chummy. Wappo was kinda funny; he liked Tina 'cause she was fine 'n nice and clean and all, but when it comes to baseball, he likes me best. Anyways, I could see he was in the mood for bein' sweet and drooly-eyed so I went home.

We didn't have no farm or anythin' like that, but we had a big, big garden and my daddy had a big shed for keeping his tools in. Well, right behind that shed we had a hotbed, but in between 'em there was a nice place for hidin'. Butch and me always hid out there when Jakey and Mikey (our little brothers) was botherin' us. It was a good place 'cause the hotbeds wasn't used till August when 'e put another kinda seed in 'em.

Well, that afternoon I went to the place, but I was scared I'd find Butch there with a girl. He's been acting dumb since he turned fourteen, 'n a couple times I came to the place 'n he had Peggy Guthrie with 'im. Butch never gets mad with me, but those times he lit into me 'n told me to get on home or he'd tell Dad I was the one that whitewashed the inside of the Harris' outhouse. Ever'body in the family got whopped for that 'n Butch took it the hardest--he knew I done it, but he never squealed.

He was at the place 'n alone. I was glad 'cause I wanted to talk to 'im about the stilts.

"Lorrie," he told me, "stay off those stilts. You know how Mr. Harris is, if you break them, Dad'll really be mad."

"But Butch, Wappo can do the stilts good 'n I just know I could too, all I need is a chance to try--I can't let Wappo be bettern' me, can I?"

"That little show-off dago's no better than you Lorrie, but if he breaks the stilts, his old man can afford to pay for them."

"I'm gonna do it, Butch. I'm gonna learn those stilts and be bettern' Wappo, you wait 'n see."

"But Lorrie, what if Tina doesn't let you use the stilts?"

"Oh, don't worry about that, I know how to git her to do anythin'."

"How?"

"Well, her mommy 'n daddy think Wappo's terrific, you know 'cause he's rich, 'n Tina's nice to Wappo, so I'll just tell Wappo that if he doesn't ask Tina to let me, I won't be on his team anymore 'n you know Wappo can't stand to lose. Well, next to him, I'm the best hitter."

"Lorrie, be careful. Dad's got a lot on his mind and if you break those stilts and he's gotta pay Harris, he'll beat the hell outta you. Lorrie, this time I won't be able to take it for you."

"It's OK Butch, it's 'bout time for me to take what I got comin' anyways. Besides I won't break 'em."

"You better get down the house now, mama will be calling you to help with supper and I don't want anyone to know about this place."

"OK Butch, see you at supper."

I went to Tina's the next day and prayed that Wappo would come along. It took him awhile, but finally he did. Sure enough, he had a clean

shirt on 'n you could tell he tried to comb his kinky-curl hair. If it wasn't for the stilts, I'd a teased 'im.

"Hi Wappo. How are you goin'?" I asked. "Fine." he answered without even battin' an eyelash.

"How are you today, Tina?" Wappo asked in his nicest voice.

"I'm fine, Victor and you look nice today." Tina never called him Wappo and, lately, he didn't call her "Boo Boo" neither.

"Can I walk on your stilts, Tina?" Wappo asked.

"Oh sure, Victor, Daddy hasn't had time to teach Joanie and me yet, but I know he will soon."

"Wappo", I said, "Do you think you could teach me to do the stilts?"

"Lorrie" he said, "You just wouldn't be good at these."

Well that really burned me up, but I begged.

"Well, just let me try."

"Laura" Tina piped, "I told you they were just for Joanie and me."

"Well Wappo is usin' 'em and he ain't Joanie or you."

"I gave Victor special permission," she said, "because he knows how to use them."

"Well I could know how to use 'em too, if you'd let Wappo teach me."

"Lorrie" Wappo said, "why don't you just forget it, OK?"

"OK, then you can just forget about havin' me on your team Victor Antonio Forchino!" I was boilin' mad 'n started for my house. Wappo stuttered around a little bit 'n then he said,

"aaah, Tina, could we just let her try it once?"

"OK, Victor, but if she can't do it, she can't keep trying."

Oh brother, how was I ever gonna get up and stay up the first time. I didn't think I could so I fixed it that if I got up and did two steps, I could do it again. Well, I was so glad that I had to wear 'em dumb, ugly, brown oxfords that were good for my feet 'cause they had thick heels on 'em. I couldn't run too good in 'em when we played baseball, but they sure did help keep my feet on those stilts 'n I did three steps the first try. Tina 'n Wappo were surprised 'n then Wappo said,

"I bet you can't walk to that fire hydrant."

"Bet I can, watch."

I just barely made it, so Wappo got on the stilts 'n went past the hydrant. Then he says,

"Tell you what, Lorrie. I dare you to walk down to the front walk of the Guthrie house."

Yikes, that was clear down the end of the block. I swallowed hard. I wanted so bad to be bettern' Wappo--I hada be better--I hada show 'em.

"OK, I'll do it, but you gotta let me practice a little--you done it before 'n today's my first."

Tina got mad. "Oh, Laura, why don't you ever just want to be a girl? Why do you always have to do the boy things and take dares and be as strong as them? Why can't you be like Joanie and me. Laura, you are such a tomboy."

I didn't want Tina mad, so I was careful not to get my dander up when she called me a tomboy--besides bein' a tomboy was fun--I didn't want to be like her anyways.

"Tina" I said, "if you let me do it, I'll go to the 'blue-bottle' field with ya." The 'blue-bottle' field was way out in the country 'n Tina loved to go there, but she was scared to go with the other girls, 'n me 'n the boys never went flower pickin". I knew that next to Wappo, I was the only one she'd feel safe with out there.

"Alright, Laura, you can practice, but remember you have to take me to the 'blue-bottle' field tomorrow."

Wappo said it was such a little tiny dare that he didn't need any practice.

"Laura" he said, usin' that name when he knew I hated it, "you better practice good because you're OK in baseball, but you can't walk that far on the stilts."

Wappo 'n Tina went down to the swing set Tina's daddy made 'er when school let out 'n I knew they could see me so I pretended to be havin' a hard time with 'em stilts. But those ugly oxfords that I hated so much really came in handy. They had heels on 'em like my daddy's shoes. Gosh, I cried when daddy said I couldn't have sneakers, but now I was glad. I coulda walked to the Guthrie house right then but I didn't want to give myself away.

By the time Wappo and Tina came back, I knew I could easy go to the Guthrie house, but I pretended to be havin' trouble still.

Wappo says, "I told you Laura," there was that braggin' voice 'o his. "I told you, you wouldn't be good at the stilts. We been watchin' you, you're no good Lorrie, you wanna take back the dare."

'No way, Wappo, I'm gonna try anyways."

We decided he would go first 'n at the start he had a little trouble 'cause his sneakers were slippin' 'n slidin'. He did it though, real good. I knew Wappo would do it, if it darn near killed 'im.

"You were wonderful, Victor." drawed Tina. "Laura won't be able to do it, she won't get to the Guthrie house."

"Oh yeah", I said. 'I'll go to the Guthrie house, go up the walk, 'n climb the steps, that's what I'll do."

"No you won't, Laura. I know you can't." Tina said.

"Oh Tina, let her go," put in Wappo, "she's the bragger--let's see her do it."

"Well I didn't know about the steps, but I knew that I would easy get to the Guthrie house and up the walk. So I started out 'n boy I did pretty good. I could feel 'em coming along behind me 'n when I turned in the Guthrie walk, I heard Wappo say,

"I never thought she'd get this far, but I know she won't do the steps, nobody can do steps on stilts."

That did it. Now I hada go the steps, if he didn' say that, I coulda stopped there 'n still looked good.

I started the steps 'n soon as I picked my foot up, I knew it was all done. Them ugly, brown oxfords, that was so good to me all day, turned on me 'n got stuck on the block. My head caved in. I heard myself cryin' 'n I prayed to God not to let me cry, 'cause they was watchin'. But God was busy somewheres else 'n He let me cry my head off. Blood was ever'place 'n in the middle of it all somewheres was one of my front teeth. I picked myself up 'n went home cryin' like a "bawl baby."

Finally, I got all cleaned up 'n stopped bawlin'. My mouth was swollen like crazy 'n all black and blue. Mama put some ice in a cloth 'n told me to go out on the porch 'n hold it on my mouth. I was 'fraid I'd get seen there so I went to the hidin' place.

I was turnin' it over 'n over in my head when Butch came in. He said the neighborhood was shocked 'n that Mr. Harris burned the stilts 'cause he didn't want nothin' like that to happen to Tina. Gosh, poor Tina never even got to learn 'em.

"Do they think I'm a failure, Butch? Do they think I'm lousy on the stilts?"

"No Lorrie, the big people said you were dumb to try it."

"An' daddy, is daddy mad at me Butch? The stilts didn' break before Harris burned 'em did they? I mean Daddy won't have to pay Harris, will 'e?"

"Lorrie, Daddy is upset, but he ain't mad. In fact, Lorrie, he's very sad."

"Sad, why's he sad?"

"Well, he talked to Dr. Roberts about one of them false teeth and I heard him tell mama that he just couldn' afford to get you one and probably wouldn't till you stopped growing. He said his pretty little girl was gonna be missing a tooth for quite awhile."

I choked back a little 'cause I knew my daddy couldn't afford it for sure, but I covered over 'n said,

"Oh, who needs an old tooth anyways? What did Wappo say, Butch?  
Did he brag about it?"

"No, he only wanted to know if losing a tooth would bother your  
batting average."

"It won't Butch, it won't"