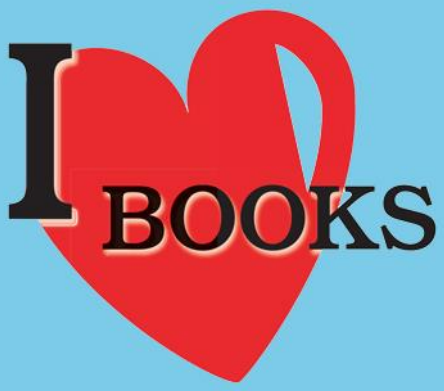


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Clare and Her Captain

Written by

Michael Morpurgo

Illustrated by

Catherine Rayner

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To dear Christian and John with much love
from Michael, Captain and Clare

For Gillian and her horses – C.R.

Sonkers

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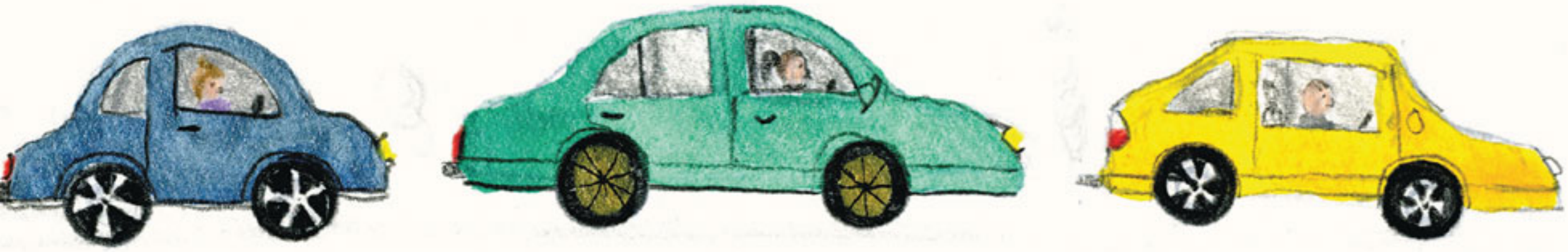
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CHAPTER 1

Traffic Jam

The car was stuffy and Clare's parents were having another quarrel. They always quarrelled in the car – in the car or in the bathroom. In the car it was always because Mum had lost the way or driven into a traffic jam that was ten miles long. This time it was both. Clare listened as Dad's voice grew louder. Mum gave up the struggle and sank into silence.

and long and low, and as it drew closer, Clare saw that there was a sweaty-looking man in a silly cowboy hat sitting behind the wheel. She grinned at him as they crawled past, and he grinned back from under his hat and waved at them.

"Blasted show-off!" Dad said under his breath, as he ground the gears. "How far to Exeter? It can't be far now, surely?"

"Not far, dear," Mum said.

"How far? Come on!" Dad snapped.

"Thirty miles or so, maybe less," Mum said.

Dad wouldn't stop. "That's what you said last time," he said.



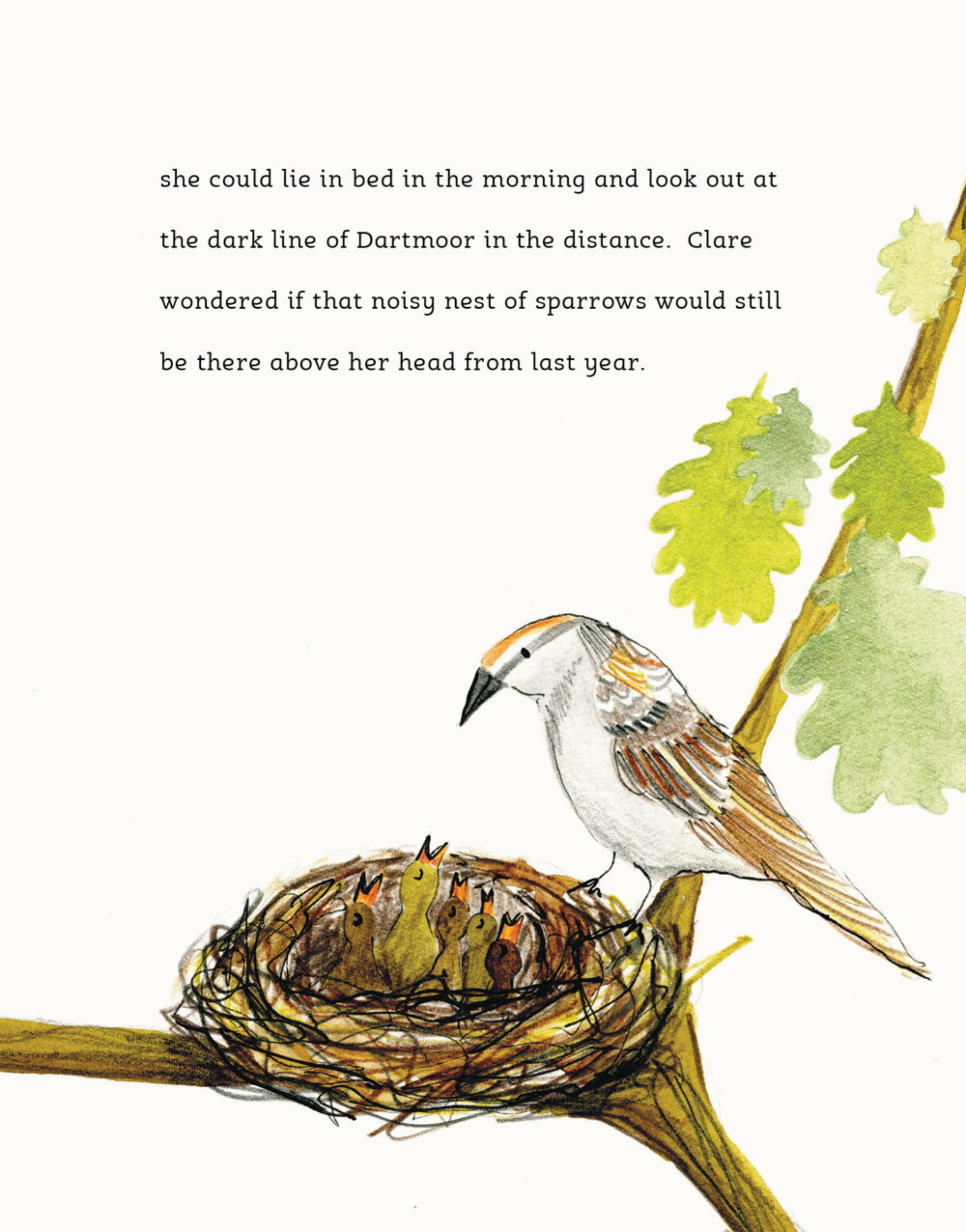
"You only asked me a mile or so back." There was an edge to Mum's voice now.

'A little longer,' Clare thought, 'and they'll really be at it.'

The seat was sticky under Clare's legs, so she pulled at her skirt, swung her legs onto the seat and curled up. She turned her face into the seat and counted the stitches in the leather, then picked at a thread that had come loose. This was the worst part of the holiday.

Every year for as long as Clare could remember they had spent two weeks of the summer holidays at Great Aunt Dora's cottage in Devon. Clare had a bedroom right up under the thatch of the roof and

she could lie in bed in the morning and look out at the dark line of Dartmoor in the distance. Clare wondered if that noisy nest of sparrows would still be there above her head from last year.



The car rumbled on. Dad was still moaning in the front. Clare felt the heat on the back of her neck. Dad's moaning merged with the drone of the engine and she slept.

The car jolted Clare awake. It shuddered, and the engine stopped. She looked up. They were there. Car doors slammed.

Aunty Dora bustled around them, fussing over their suitcases. There was a quick supper of hot tomato soup and cheese on toast, and Clare found herself inside her room and alone. The window was open and Clare could just make out the moors on the darkening horizon. There was no sign of the sparrows' nest in the warm thatch above.

*

Clare had breakfast the next morning with Aunty Dora – the smell of frying bacon and toast had brought her flying down the stairs. Mum and Dad weren't up yet. Aunty Dora pestered her with questions about school.

"When do you go to your next school, dear?" she said, as she sat down on the other side of the table from Clare and sipped her tea noisily.

"I'm already there, Aunty," Clare said. "I've been there for a year now."

"Oh, that's right, dear, of course you have," Aunty Dora said. "And have you got the same boyfriend still? Richard, wasn't it?"

"Robbie, Aunty," Clare said. "His name was Robbie. I haven't seen him for ages."

Aunty Dora was always after gossip and her voice fell to a whisper as she probed for more information about Clare's new boyfriends.

"Peeta's one, then there's Artemis," said Clare.

Aunty Dora nodded and listened as Clare reeled off at least a dozen names from the last six books she'd read. In the end, Aunty Dora began to look shocked. Clare could never make out why she asked so many questions, because she never remembered the answers from one year to the next.

