Margot

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I first saw her in the late afternoon of a cold autumn day, a tiny red calf in a large damp field. I remember hoping that her mother was somewhere nearby. But each day as I passed her while walking my dogs on the quiet road known as Canrawer, I saw she was alone. She looked thin and forlorn and my heart went out to her. I wished I could do something for her but I didn't know what. I spoke to her each time I passed by and she started calling out to me when she saw me walking along the road, although she made no attempt to come closer to the fence. I called back to her but after mooing to me she looked away and continued her lonely crunching of the short, tough grass. I had the irrational feeling that I was letting her down. I started thinking about her at different times during my day and especially on those nights when it was raining and blowing a gale. I kept wondering how she was coping, a newborn calf, on a diet of grass and no protection from the elements. I also wondered about her mother. What had happened to her? I asked my friend Carmel, but she couldn't help me. The calf belonged to the farmer and, despite being close neighbours, the farmer and his family and Carmel and her family did not speak and had not spoken for many years due to a dispute over land which had ended badly. Carmel became agitated whenever it came up so I had not pressed her for details. It had caused a great amount of anger and hurt and, as a result, the red calf took on for Carmel some of the bad aura of the farmer himself, and she could not allow herself to be interested in her fate. I had not met the farmer; in fact I had avoided him out of loyalty to Carmel.

I considered myself lucky to have made a friend in this small town. It had not been easy at first, knowing no one and with just my newly adopted dogs for company during the long days. I had pushed for the move here; had encouraged the uprooting of my husband and two boys to the other side of the world after years of longing for this wild, green, rainy

place. The West is different from the rest of Ireland. In Dublin they call it the Wild West, implying that it is a lawless place where the rule of the centre cannot hold. It is not so wild now, but it had been in times past as the Irish people were moved further and further 'beyond the pale' until they were almost in the Atlantic Ocean. This was the home of the pirate queen, Grace O'Malley who ruled the West Coast and who had defied Elizabeth I. This was also where the Irish famine had hit hardest and longest, where the land was poor and landholdings small. Here famine graves and workhouse ruins were still visible and alive in the memories of local people. But there was little hardship visible when we arrived here at the turn of the millennium. In fact it was possible to hear the roar of the Celtic Tiger as house prices went up on a weekly basis and farmers became paper millionaires overnight. When we arrived, we were already priced out of the Galway market but were happy enough to settle in this pretty little town, Oughterard, on the doorstep of the windswept and magnificent Connemara. The town was divided by the Owenriff, a river so clean and clear that pearl mussels could be seen in places, opening and closing their shells to the undulations of the water. In addition to these riches, the town edged onto magnificent Lough Corrib, famous throughout Europe for its trout and salmon. It also had a literary heritage, having been mentioned by a character in the James Joyce short story, *The Dead*. We had driven through it many years before and dreamed about living here. Amazingly, we made the dream come true, except the reality was much lonelier than I had expected. For the first time in my adult life, I was not working and it had been a revelation the way that one simple fact affected the way people regarded me and treated me. To say I had lost identity was an understatement. Questions I had long thought resolved arose again to taunt me: What was I doing here? Who was I to be? What was my purpose? My friendship with Carmel was a great comfort as it brought companionship and laughter. We had met on the road walking our dogs, introduced ourselves and over time realised that we enjoyed each other's company. Since we lived on the same road, as did her parents, we fell into a regular routine of walks and visits. She ran a successful Bed & Breakfast business so was often free in the afternoons.

I loved her strong, fierce character and her sense of humour. Her family had lived in this town for generations and I enjoyed her stories about local characters and events. She was also an animal lover which is something we had in common, but I was on my own with this calf.

One especially cold drizzly evening, I was walking toward the field where the calf usually grazed when I heard her call come from behind me. I looked around and was surprised to see her locked up in a half open shed in a nearby paddock next to a small cottage. I understood that one of the farmer's elderly relatives lived in the cottage, a man called Murt, whom I had never seen. I wondered what she was doing in the shed. Perhaps they had put her in there for protection, now that the nights were getting cold. I stood watching her for a while and she watched me back. Slowly, an idea came to me. My Nanna had always kept a house cow for milking and sometimes while the cow was being milked her calf would be given a bucket of milk to drink. When I stayed with my Nanna during school holidays, my job was to put my hand in the bucket and allow the calf to suck on my fingers as she swallowed the milk. I had loved this job and had been shocked and thrilled at the strength of the calf's suction as she greedily took my small hand into her mouth. I called my dogs and hurried home. I quickly heated up some milk and found a small plastic bucket which would do for a container. I set off again, carrying it awkwardly in an attempt to keep the milk from spilling and all the while trying to look inconspicuous. Thankfully, I passed no one at this lonely time of the day. When I reached the calf, I had first to climb the high wooden gate which was padlocked. As I did this I glanced over at the cottage and saw smoke coming out of the chimney. I hoped its occupant had settled in for the night and would not disturb me. It was no mean feat to climb the gate without spilling the milk and it was done at some cost to my dignity. I approached the shed and the now very curious calf with my heart thumping, feeling excited and pleased with myself. I talked to her as I approached and she stuck her head out through the horizontal wooden railings.

'Hello little girl, look what I have for you. This will help you get through the night.'

The little girl did not meekly lap at the milk. She sucked it down in what appeared to be one long gulp and then used her strong, hard head to push and dislodge the wooden rail and start to climb her way out of the shed and towards that now empty bucket.

'No, no, no, you can't come out. Stay there,' I pleaded.

Despite me trying to push her back, she at last had the front half of her body over the wooden rail and her front feet outside. She was now stuck half in and half out. I watched all this in horror as my peaceful scenario went to hell. At this point I understood that I would never get her back inside. So I stepped back and tried to coax her all the way out by holding the bucket out to her. This worked as she made one almighty push through the barrier and was out. From my former vantage point on the road, she had looked like a tiny, soft, vulnerable creature. She no longer felt like one as she lunged at the empty container with a determination and a desperation that defied any opposition. I was no match for her. I was soon on my backside in the mud as she shoved her head in the bucket looking for another drop of the precious milk. Once she realised it was empty she stood aside and watched me get up. I picked up the mud-covered bucket and made my way back to the fence. I admonished myself as I climbed back over the fence.

'Oh God, what have I done? She was at least somewhere warm for the night and now she is out in the cold again!'

What was I to do? I couldn't just walk home and leave her out all night but, equally, there was no way I could get her back inside on my own. There was nothing for it, I would have to knock on the door of Murt's cottage, confess my misadventure and offer my help to get her back where she belonged. It felt like a hard thing to do. We were still fairly new to the village, 'blow-ins' from Australia trying to make a home here. I had behaved in an unusual way. How could I explain it? How would he react? I approached the door with a great trepidation and knocked. I could hear what sounded like a small dog yapping very loudly. The door was opened by a tall, heavily set, elderly man who greeted me with his lovely west of Ireland accent:

'Hello missus, what can I do for you?'

'Oh hello, I'm Deirdre (I pronounced it in the Irish way) from further up the road, you know, we are in one of the two new houses built up there next to Iris Harben' I rambled.

'Oh yes missus, would you like to come in?'

'Oh no and I'm so sorry to bother you but I've done something that has turned out badly and I've come to apologise and to see if I can help fix it… You see I brought some warm milk down for the red calf and she pushed her way out of the shed to get at it and now she's outside!'

'Oh, don't worry about Margot missus, Poraic will get her back in the morning.'

'But then she will be out all night in the cold! I want to help get her back!'

My concern at the thought of her being out all night was mixed with relief that he hadn't been angry.

'Oh, don't worry about her missus, she'll be just fine.' He was laughing now.

I felt helpless. Clearly he did not see this as an issue of great importance. I was in no position to argue as it was not my land and she was not my calf. I thought of something though.

'Would it be all right if I sometimes brought her down some milk?'

'Oh sure, whatever you like Missus,' he replied smiling.

I considered this to be carte blanche permission to feed her every night. And also, I now knew her name – Margot. Our folly had begun!

The very next evening I returned with my bucket of milk and found her back in the shed. This time, I climbed inside with her so she would not climb out. She pushed and shoved at me as I climbed through the railings in an attempt to get to the milk. I quickly lowered the bucket and she began sucking and slurping up the warm liquid. On this occasion

she was calmer and therefore managed to swallow most of the milk rather than spilling it. When she had finished, I let her move the bucket around the floor until she had satisfied herself that it was empty. Up close in the shed I became aware of her rich, mealy, fermenting grass smell and her warmth. In such close proximity I was able to have a good look at her. I saw that her eyes were messy so I dipped my handkerchief in the water trough and attempted to clean them for her. She shook her head a few times but then let me gently wipe away the dirt from around her eyes. Her coat was dull and matted due to her diet and also because of not being licked and groomed by her mother. Mother cows constantly physically care for their young and a calf who has been separated or has never known this looks lost and neglected. She also let me stroke her coat a few times before moving away. I decided to leave the bucket with her while we continued on our walk and collect it on the way back. She seemed to like pushing it around it around the floor with her nose. When I returned I saw that she had pushed the bucket out of the shed onto the ground outside which made it easier for me to retrieve, and after this we settled into a regular late afternoon routine.

After several days I realised that the bucket was inadequate. She was clumsy with it and was always so desperate to suck on something that sometimes she tried to suck the side of the bucket. I visited the chemist to buy some necessary equipment. I could use a wine bottle for a container but I needed something for her to suck on. I knew the chemist and his assistant reasonably well as they supplied me with the pharmaceuticals I needed. I felt, nevertheless, awkward and was rehearsing the wording of my request when Mary, his rather pious looking assistant walked up to me and asked what I needed. Without thinking I replied that I needed a very large teat. She blushed scarlet and I responded in kind, coming out in a cold sweat at the same time. I made it worse: 'you know, made of rubber and about this long,' I measured about five inches with my fingers. An explanation was begging to be heard. But none was forthcoming. What could I say? It's for a calf I'm feeding? Mary and the chemist knew full well that we had no land (it is virtually impossible for non-Irish speakers to buy agricultural land in the West of Ireland) and if I had told her she would surely have thought: 'What in God's name are you doing feeding someone else's calf?' She

rummaged in a drawer and came out with the object. It looked highly suspicious in that it looked like it belonged in a sex shop. I tried to be jolly. 'Oh very good, that will be perfect!' I said rather too loudly. She wrapped it up and handed it to me with a closed expression. I felt like a heathen with foreign ways.

As I walked home I wondered if I should have told her the whole story. But I figured that it would probably create an even worse impression in that she might think I was mad. I wasn't too sure myself. I dropped the dogs off and drove the car to a big agricultural supplier on the edge of town. I thought I may as well do this properly. I bought a large bag of dry milk powder made especially for young calves. I looked around at the huge piles of bagged formula for calves and thought about how many calves were separated from their mothers in this part of Ireland alone. There were hundreds of these heavy paper sacks of calf formula lined up against a far wall. What an insane world where calves are separated from their mothers so that they can be milked to supply the calf formula factory with milk so they can produce milk powder for separated calves (and of course for humans who, unlike calves, do not actually need it). In dairy herds the calves are separated from their mothers immediately after birth, the girl calves destined for the herd and so fed on milk formula and the boy calves sent on long journeys to be turned into 'veal'. At this line of thinking I felt overwhelmed with sadness but pulled myself out of it by thinking that at least there was one calf I could help.

That evening I made up the powdered formula with warm water, poured it into an empty wine bottle, cut a hole in the new teat and squeezed it over the top. I wrapped the bottle up in a towel, placed it in a shopping bag, called the dogs and set off. The sun had long gone for the day and it was grey and cold with a fading golden light shining from the west. I noticed that the blackberry hedgerows were starting to lose their leaves while those that remained on the huge oak and beech trees were starting to look dull and lifeless. Soon they too would fall and we would be left with bare branches until next March. It was during these long, bare winters that you appreciated the holly and the ivy, the only green

left in the fields and forest. It was easy to see why these plants had been eulogised and worshipped during the pagan and Christian winter festivals. We had already lived here through all the seasons and so knew how each would unfold. The winters were hard because they were dark and long, with little sunshine, lots of rain and wind and sometimes snow. There were no flowers until the first snowdrops in March. Because we were still relatively new we found the winters something of a novelty, especially the idea of lighting a fire each evening and having candles with our dinner. Already I could smell the smoky turf in the air as neighbours lit their fires for the night. Most people here still cut their own turf, dried it in piles out on the bog and then brought it in under cover for winter. Most families had rights to a certain area of bog where they could dig and cut their turf, as long as there were family members able and willing to do it. There is quite a skill in digging for turf and without practice it would be a heavy and difficult job. The poet Seamus Heaney describes it beautifully in his poem, 'Digging':

> By God, the old man could handle a spade.
> Just like his old man.
>
> My grandfather cut more turf in a day
> Than any other man on Toner's bog.
> Once I carried him milk in a bottle
> Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
> To drink it, then fell to right away
> Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
> Over his shoulder, going down and down
> For the good turf. Digging.

I wondered if my son's friends would be digging for turf or buying it pre-packaged in the supermarket. Perhaps by then it would be banned altogether, given that bogs were now recognised to be precious and turf identified as a non-renewable source of energy.

I was lost in these thoughts as the dogs ran on ahead and around the corner past the farmer's house. I stared straight ahead, worried about what I should say if I ran into him as I felt myself to be in a very awkward position. I continued on down the hill, passing Carmel's parents' farmhouse on the right, then almost immediately past Murt's house and round the corner to Margot's field and shed. The bottle was a great success. She took to it straight away and shut her eyes in bliss as she sucked away and occasionally pushed forward into the bottle as calves do with their mother to hurry up the flow of the milk. I saw steam rising from around her mouth in the cold shed. I could almost sense how the warm milk felt in her stomach and it gave me comfort to see her looking satisfied, at least, for a while. When she saw me put the empty bottle back in the bag she tried to put her head in after it. I laughed and she let me rub the soft fur behind her ears. It was dark as I made my way back, but I felt good, in a way I had not felt since we arrived here.

Each time I passed Murt's cottage I heard his little dog barking. One afternoon after I fed Margot, I knocked on his door again and asked him if his dog, Trixie, would like to join us on our walk and he replied by immediately picking up her lead and handing it to me with a smile. When I returned he invited me in to sit in front of the fire. I sat down in the spare, ancient armchair and Trixie jumped onto my lap. We talked for a while in an easy way and he told me that he had worked most of his life in England but was now home for good. He suffered from leg ulcers and could no longer work. His story was typical of his generation in that he had grown up in a country that could not supply sufficient jobs for its young people. Now it had turned into the Celtic Tiger and it looked like those days were gone forever. Murt was not so sure:

> 'This place has got too rich too quick. People have lost the run of themselves. It can't last.'

It turned out that he was not exactly related to the farmer but to the farmer's wife, Theresa, who was his niece. Murt himself had never married. We talked about Margot and I asked him what had happened to her mother.

'She had mastitis. Poraic sent her to the factory.'

My stomach lurched as this sank in. I had suffered from mastitis myself after the birth of my first son and knew how painful it was but also that it could be treated with antibiotics. Thoughts of that last lonely journey of Margo's mother would have to wait. There was nothing I could say here. Murt offered no opinion on the subject and I was in no position to comment. Soon after I made ready to go and told him I would call again for Trixie. It was dark when I left and started up the hill for home. My dogs had waited outside and now ran eagerly ahead. I passed Carmel's parents' house and saw the warm glow from their kitchen fire. The road ahead was dark and deserted but I felt safe, and somehow watched over. That feeling came over me again the next afternoon as I was preparing Margot's feed. As I set out in the late afternoon light it slowly came to me what it was. I could almost feel that I was channelling my Nanna. It was a lovely feeling of being close to her again and had something to do with the repetitive nature of the preparations of the milk formula and then the journey to the calf. It came back to me, now, vividly, how just before dusk, regardless of the weather and how we might have felt, Nanna and I would mix up the feed for her cow: chaff, barley, lucerne hay and molasses mixed with a little hot water to make a moist mulch. It smelt so good, not human good but definitely cow good. Nanna's house cow (usually called Mitzi or Bella) would start licking her lips the moment she saw us with the bucket. She would rush ahead of us into the milking shed and push her large bulk into the milking corner. Nanna then tipped the delicious mixture into a large, round, metal container and began to milk the now busy cow. If there was a calf, I would slip my hand into the bucket and let her have some of yesterday's milk; otherwise, I would sit next to Nanna and press my cheek against the cow's warm hide and breathe in her grassy, cow smell. These were some of the most peaceful moments of my childhood.

The weeks passed by, the trees and hedges became bare, and soon we were in the thick of winter. Margot grew larger and her now glossy red coat became longer and thicker. She was mostly in her shed but if I arrived early and she was in the field I had only to call her name for her to come running up to the fence for her bottle. As the field got muddier, Margot developed a new habit. She would come galloping down the slope of the field but for the last eight feet or so she would 'ski' towards me over the mud, open her mouth for the bottle and stop dead in front of me, all in one continuous movement. I had to have the bottle perfectly positioned for her to achieve this and it was like a dance move that we performed together. As the months went by, she began her 'slide' further and further up the slope and many times I held my breath, thinking she would crash into me and the fence, but she never did. She was always able to put the brakes on at the last minute and seemed to enjoy the mastery of the pas de deux. One afternoon after she finished her bottle I put my hand out to pat her but she quickly opened her mouth, and closed it gently around my hand, all the while looking straight at me. She started sucking on my hand with her big, rough tongue. It was a strange sensation and once again took me back to when I fed the poddy calf out of a bucket. How could I deny her? She had missed out on the crucial time with her mother and if this gave her some comfort, what harm?

My visits to Murt grew more regular and on days when the weather was particularly brutal he would offer me a whiskey along with a seat in front of the fire. My dogs were now welcome too and curled up happily on the floor with Trixie. I enjoyed the musty, peaty, smoky, smell of his cottage and the way it seemed like part of some more authentic Ireland from the past, not brash and smart and showy. Bit by bit, without me knowing about it or thinking about it, we were becoming friends. The winter seemed to go on forever with days of ferocious wind and rain. West of Ireland winters are the stuff of legend with only the hardiest animals left out in fields. On one of these days I commented to Carmel how good it was that many farmers cared enough about their cows to lock them up for winter. She replied with one of her favourite expressions:

> 'Are you mad? It's not the cows they care about but their precious fields. They don't want the ground to get chopped up and turned into mud. That's all they care about.'

This was a revelation. I understood that Carmel's reaction was partly due to her feeling for the animals and partly due to her antipathy towards cattle farming. Her family were Connemara Pony breeders and because land was so scarce and precious, there could be conflict between the two interests. I knew that it had been land at the heart of her families' dispute with the farmer. She started to fill in the details.

> 'We had a Pony Trekking business and in spring and summer we rode out with tourists along the old railway line and over to the lakes and the bog, all on Common land. In spring it was wonderful with wildflowers and blue bog orchids everywhere. We had people come to us from all over Ireland and some from abroad. It was our living and in summer the four of us girls worked from daybreak to sunset. He (the farmer) decided he wanted the gate to the railway line locked for his cows, which meant we couldn't ride out that way. Lawyers got involved and it ended up in court'.

Tears filled her eyes.

> 'You wouldn't believe the stories they told. It worked for them because they won and Mum and Dad were ordered to pay costs. It took them years to pay off the debt. The worst thing was that we had to wind up the business and that nearly ruined us.'

This had been a terrible event. People took sides which made life very difficult in such a small town where it seemed that everyone was at least distantly related through blood or marriage to everyone else. It occurred to me later that the dispute was much wider than a dispute between neighbours. It also represented a victory of cattle farming over the local tradition of Connemara Pony breeding, showing and trekking.

This was after all the home of the famous Connemara stallion, Cannon Ball, a legend in these parts. Born in 1904, he was the first stallion to appear in the Connemara Pony Stud Book and was owned by a local, Harry O'Toole, known as Honri. Cannon Ball took part in races in Oughterard and all over Ireland and was never beaten. He once raced the train from Oughterard to the nearby town of Leam and was waiting at Leam when the train went past. Locals still tell stories about how Honri and Cannon Ball would head off to the market in Athenry on Saturdays and how, for a fee of ten shillings, mares would be covered at various points on the journey. The famous stallion usually had to make his own way home, with his owner laid out and sleeping off his pints in the trap. When Cannon Ball died in March 1926 the sad news quickly spread around the county and the country. His body was laid out on his stable door which was placed over a table in the owner's kitchen and a wake was held in the house. One version holds that the wake went on for seven days and seven nights, though this seems unlikely (but not impossible). When the time came, the pony was carried out of the house on the stable door and buried upright, in a straw lined grave (the highest honour for a horse) facing east towards the Oughterard racecourse, the site of many triumphs. A white thorn tree was planted on his grave and a long eulogy recited at his graveside. The following lines are a small part of the long poem.

Sleep brave old pony, thy race is run,
No more with earthly kin you'll mingle.
Dream of racehorse triumphs you have won,
Of noble steeds and epic deeds,
And bookies left without a jingle.

The following Sunday at Mass, the priest denounced Honri for waking a horse which was considered a sacrilege. A walk-out followed as many in the indignant congregation stood up for Cannon Ball and for Honri. This milestone in Irish Catholic Church history was later settled with Honri and the others accepted back into the congregation. Any Connemara Pony

owner who could prove ancestry back to Cannon Ball told you about it loud and long. Carmel's grandfather had been the proud owner of one of Cannon Ball's most successful progeny, Bridge Boy. Though long dead, his name still hung over the stable door. While the Connemara Pony was still loved and revered in Oughterard, cattle breeding and fattening was providing a lucrative living for many farmers. And here I was in the middle of it, Carmel's friend, feeding the farmers calf. It had become a 'no-go' area of discussion for Carmel and me. I understood that she didn't want to hear about the calf and she understood that I had come to care about Margot and couldn't stop. It was not a difficulty for us as we had plenty of other things to talk about.

Just as it seemed that winter was the natural state of the world, I noticed some subtle changes. The first sign was the days growing longer which meant I could leave it a little later to go to Margot in the afternoon. Next, I noticed snowbells, then freesias and cyclamen popping up on the sides of the roads and footpaths, while hedges of fuchsia and lilac came into fragrant bloom. Some days were sunny and almost warm and then we returned to wind and rain for several more. At some indefinable point, the change became inexorable and spring was here to stay. Margot started to look, if not happy, at least frisky and energetic. Sometimes on her way down the hill towards me she would kick up her hind legs in a kind of exuberant dance. Everyone, it seemed, was more cheerful and hopeful. I felt more cheerful myself and more at home. This was the start of the long twilights which stretched on to 10 o'clock and beyond. Some nights seemed never to get properly dark but to settle in with a dark blue magic light until morning.

The ancient trees were showing tiny, bright green tips that turned into their early summer leaves and the woodland behind our house was covered in bluebells. As the summer took hold, Margot was moved from her small field with the shed to join the rest of the herd in a larger field further along the road. This field led directly out to the expanse of lakes and bog behind the town and so gave the cows beautiful grazing all summer. Often when I came to the field in the afternoon there was no sign of her, nor the rest of the herd. On those days I stood at the gate and called out her name. I scanned the tops of the distant hills and waited

until finally I saw a red heifer standing at the top looking down towards me. I called once more and this triggered her rapid, galloping descent which developed into the giant slide and the open mouth for the bottle. At other times she could be seen eating grass with the rest of the herd, but the moment she heard her name called she raced toward me in her usual way. The other cows looked on curiously. I had originally thought that I would feed her to help her get through the winter, but now it was summer and I didn't know how and when to stop. I knew that technically, she probably didn't need the milk anymore but I also knew that left alone, a young cow kept sucking from its mother until a new calf was born a year later. She came enthusiastically every time I called her name and enjoyed the drink and the contact, as did I, so we continued.

We continued through the summer and into the autumn and through the next winter. As the following spring arrived, I knew I had to let her go. It was time for her to go into calf herself and it had to stop. By this stage all my neighbours were aware of our activities, especially a woman called Margot who lived nearby and who had got used to hearing her name shouted out each afternoon. The Irish are a generous and polite people and no one called me mad or crazy; in fact, many stopped me in the street and told me I was kind. They told me I would receive a special blessing for being kind to a red heifer (which holds a special place in Irish mythology). When I told Murt I was going to wean Margot I thought he would burst with trying not to laugh. Then he said: 'Oh, Missus, I thought she would be suckin' on that bottle till she died of old age.' And then we were both laughing. And we laughed for a long time and I think a lot of people laughed but it was always good-natured laughing.

At the same time, I was uneasy when I thought about her future. What if she failed to go into calf or if she took after her mother and developed mastitis? This raised difficult questions for me. Where did my responsibility for her end? Was it enough to know that I had helped her a little through her first long and lonely winter? Or was I now responsible for her welfare? I had always believed that whoever came across an animal in need was responsible for it; but she was hardly in need now, and what of the other cows in the herd?

Did she deserve special treatment simply because she was my 'pet'? These questions seemed unresolvable and in the end I decided I must try to buy her. If the farmer agreed, she could stay with the herd but belong to me. Carmel offered a generous alternative which was for her to live on her uncle's farm, nearby. In the end the farmer did not want to sell her but his wife reassured me that Margot would be there for the span of her natural life. She explained that when they put a name on a calf, it does not get sent to the factory and that she would always be there for me to visit. Certainly, for the next five years that we remained in Oughterard, Margot lived with the herd.

I often saw her out beyond the bog when I walked my dogs. The first time I saw her again I called her name and she looked up quickly and scanned around until she found me. She stared for some time and then she put her head down and continued eating. It made me both happy and sad but mostly happy to see that she no longer needed me. For years I did this until she stopped raising her head when I called. She is always in my memory and while I know that I helped her in some small way, I know that she helped me in more ways than I can ever say. I used to fear that the farmer would consider that my feeding Margot held an implied criticism of him. I needn't have worried as the very next year he invited me to name and care for another orphan calf. There followed more calves, more dogs, more connections, more activities and more friendships. But it all began with tiny Margot alone in a damp field on a cold autumn day.