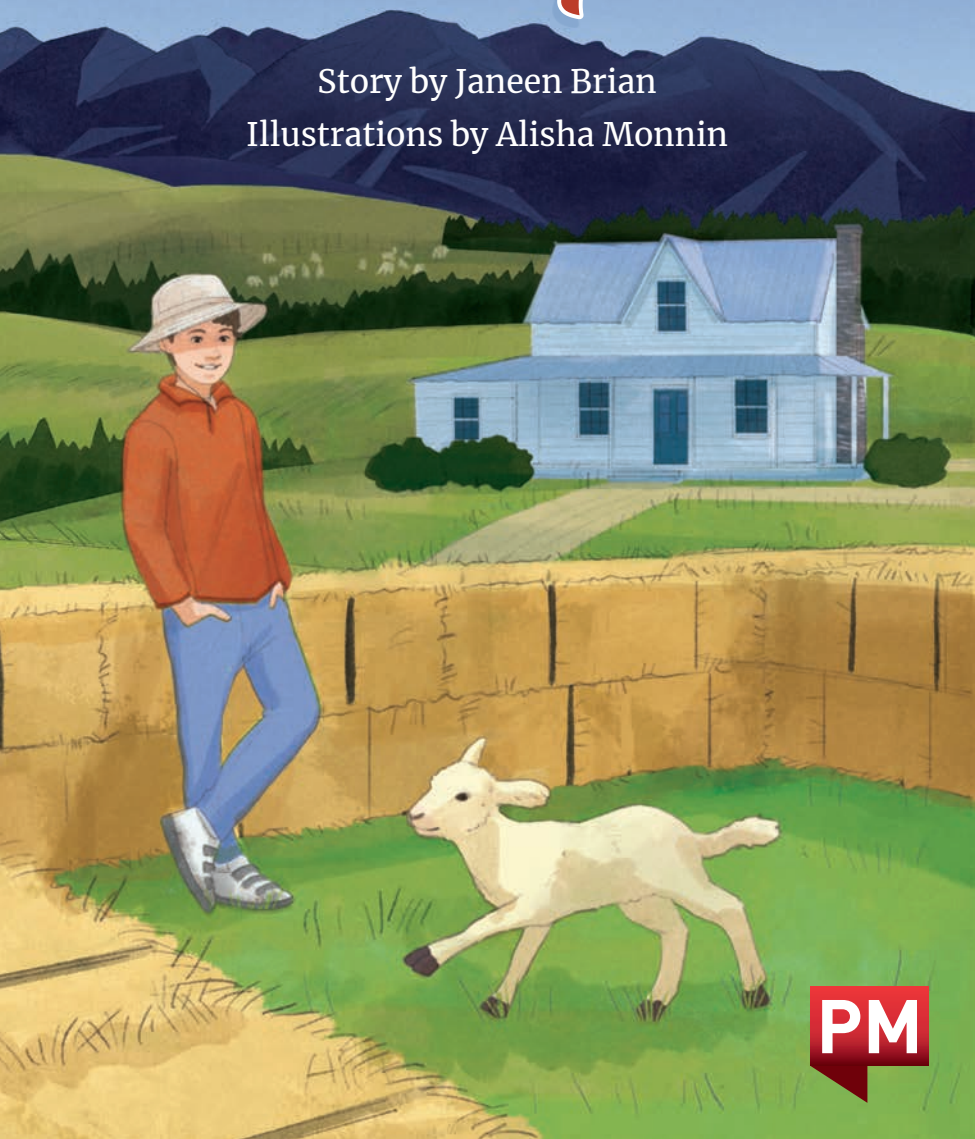


Not a Country Kid

Story by Janeen Brian

Illustrations by Alisha Monnin



PM

Contents

Chapter 1	Farewell, Taco	5
Chapter 2	The Farm	9
Chapter 3	Three Lambs	17
Chapter 4	Hero	24
Chapter 5	An Escape!	29
Chapter 6	A Rescue	38
Chapter 7	Mum's Surprise	44

Chapter 1

Farewell, Taco

Finn held out the scrappy dog lead to Mrs Abara. Choking back a sob, he said, “Taco will probably need a new lead. He’s chewed this one a bit.” Finn attempted a laugh, but none came.

Mrs Abara patted Finn’s shoulder. “You know I love Taco, don’t you? I will take him for walks. I will sing to him. I will show him your picture.” She pointed to a photo on her living room shelf. It was of Finn and Taco. Taco’s fur shone golden in the sunlight. “I will keep him happy, Finn. No need to take him to a dog shelter.” She nodded kindly. “You travel well. And you make a happy new home with your mama. Maybe later, we can phone or make a video call.”

Finn dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around his pet cocker spaniel. Taco gazed up at him.



“I love you, Taco,” Finn said, tears trickling down his cheeks. “Don’t forget me, will you?” Blinking hard, he muttered his thanks and said goodbye to Mrs Abara.

His eyes blurring, Finn rushed back to his apartment next door and burst out crying.

“Oh, Finn.” His mother hurried towards him from the kitchen and gave him a hug. “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Finn said, his breath catching. “But the look in his eyes, Mum. The way he looked at me!”

Finn’s mum wiped strands of light brown hair off his cheeks, now damp with grief. “Come on,” she said gently. “Let’s have something to eat, and then we’ll do the last-minute checking of passports and so on.”

Finn struggled to eat even the smallest portion of chicken schnitzel and salad, his favourite meal. And later that night, his sleep was ragged with dreams.

The next morning, they tidied and cleaned the apartment. Finn glanced at Mrs Abara’s place, hoping he might see Taco through the window, but the curtains were closed.

On their way to the airport, Finn stared out the taxi window as the city traffic rushed past. It felt as if his school and friends were being swept away as well.

And everywhere he looked, there were dog owners walking or running with their pets. Finn bit down on his trembling lip.



Occasionally, his mum caught his eye and smiled encouragingly. “I know how you feel, Finn,” she’d said a while back, when she had explained her plan for them to move back to her home country. “But the cost to get a pet across to New Zealand is a lot more than we can afford. It’s over a thousand dollars. And then there’s the extra cost to get Taco housed while he’s quarantined for about ten days. It’s just not possible.”

Finn’s heart dropped at his mum’s words. He knew money couldn’t appear like magic in a bank account.

Chapter 2

The Farm

As the plane landed in New Zealand, Finn’s mum gripped his hand. Her face sparkled. Her dream to return to her homeland had come true. But what about Finn? What was it going to be like living with his mum’s older brother, Uncle Rob, while his mum stayed in the city? Finn knew she had to sort out a job, a house and a car, but he’d never even met his uncle.

They had spoken briefly on the phone, but Uncle Rob refused to video call. “Give me sheep over technology, any day,” he had said. “My hands are for farming, not for pressing fiddly buttons while staring at a screen.”





At the airport entrance, Finn's mum pointed out the Māori carvings. Then, as they collected their luggage, she said, "Uncle Rob ... he's ... well, it's good of him to have you."

"How long will I be staying with him?" asked Finn, hitching his backpack onto his shoulders. His head buzzed with anxious thoughts.

"Not long," said his mum, vaguely. Then she exclaimed, "There he is! Uncle Rob. Wave, Finn."

But Finn had only seen a small photo of the man. For a moment, he wasn't sure who to wave to. Finally, he saw a man about his mum's age waving back at them.

Outside the airport, Finn and his mum hugged. Finn swallowed hard.

"Thanks again, Rob," Finn's mum said to his uncle. "Love you, Finn. Be good. I'll phone, and I'll come for you as soon as everything's settled. Okay?"

"Goodbye, Mum," Finn said. She hugged him again before she went.

"We've got a bit of a drive ahead of us," said Uncle Rob, heaving himself into a dusty truck with an open back. "I suppose you ate something on the plane?"

"I'm all right, thanks," said Finn, pressing a hand against his stomach to stop the grumbling noise.

Three hours later, they swung into a long driveway. After they'd brought in the luggage, Uncle Rob pointed towards an open door. "That's your room," he said. "Drop your things in there, and I'll throw some meat and veg together for dinner. I don't do fancy food, as it's just me. I cook plain."

The house was full of old furniture, and it smelt stale and musty, especially Finn's bedroom. He was filled with homesickness.