

PRAISE FOR *DUCK DREAMS*

“The plotting is so skillful you hardly know it’s there.  
You just want the story to go on (and on) . . .”

— JOAN BLOS, Newbery Medal and American Book Award  
winning children’s author

# TEN-YEAR-OLD SIMON DREAMS OF BECOMING A FARMER,

but his uncle says that Jews and farming don’t mix. Then, after Simon’s younger brother narrowly escapes an accident on the streets of Boston, their family moves to the country, and Simon sees a chance to prove his uncle wrong. Along the way, he faces a chicken-cheater, duck disasters, and friendship troubles. Will Simon’s duck dreams ever come true?

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# **DUCK DREAMS**

**CITY BOY TO FARMER BOY**

**BY ELIZABETH SEGEL**

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# **PART ONE**

**Y**ou want to be **what** when you grow up, nephew?"

"I'm going to be a farmer, Uncle Herman," Simon said firmly. Uncle Herman, Papa's brother and partner in the clothing business, nearly choked on his after-dinner cigar. "What? Who ever heard of a Jewish farmer!" he sputtered. "In the old country, a Jew could maybe own a cow, but not a farm."

"Pa, you're out of date," spoke up Simon's cousin Joe. "Haven't you heard of the 'back to the land' movement? I wouldn't say many Jews are farmers now, but there are a few, I hear. Remember, this is a new world."

"Children, is time to go," Mama called from the

kitchen where she was helping Aunt Bella with the washing-up.

“Thanks, Joe,” Simon said as he wrapped a warm scarf around his neck, preparing for the brisk walk home with his family.

“You’re welcome, cuz, but I’m afraid that if you’re set on farming, here in Boston you’ll have to settle for pigeon-farming,”

“Ha-ha. Just watch me, Joe,” came Simon’s voice as he clomped down the stairs.

Simon’s dream of becoming a farmer got him into real trouble a few days later. On the first warm day of spring, he sat in mean Miss Kane’s classroom as she droned on and on about punctuation. Why didn’t the dismissal bell clang? Was it broken?

To pass the time, he pictured himself milking a cow. He could almost hear the swish, swish of milk filling a bucket, when his daydream was interrupted by a fierce whack on his knuckles. “Ow!” he yelled, jumping up and banging his knees on his desk. It was Miss Kane’s dreaded ruler. He could barely keep from tearing into Miss Kane, but he stuck his poor knuckles in his mouth and sucked on them

instead. He had sworn he'd never talk back to Miss Kane. If he did, she'd be sure to make him stay after school, and that was the worst punishment he could imagine.

Miss Kane spoke icily: "Simon Hirsh! I am speaking to you! Answer my question! I cannot understand it. I remember your sister Rachel as one of the best students I have ever taught. You have the brains to be a good student as well. But look at that paper... your diagram looks like chicken-scratching." She screwed up her bony face even more. "You've gotten smudges all over it. Don't your people teach children to wash their hands?"

"Yes, ma'am," Simon murmured meekly, but inside he boiled. Miss Kane thought she was better than her immigrant students and their parents. She was a *real* American, she told them once ... as if they weren't! She cracked you with her ruler if you spoke a word of Yiddish or Italian, even if you had just come over from the old country. She even hit Lester Goldberg on the head one day, and Lester couldn't help being ... Lester.

Because Miss Kane's family had been Americans for a long time, that didn't mean that newcomers



weren't Americans. Papa and Mama were born in Russia, but they'd gotten their citizen papers in 1900—ten years ago. Simon was only a baby then, but he remembered the year because Papa always said proudly: "Your Mama and I—new Americans for the new American century!"

When the bell rang at last, Simon dashed out, hurrying through the halls to meet his brother Benny at the third-grade classroom. At least it was Friday. No more Miss Kane until Monday.

Benny was watching for him. When they were outside, Simon took off. "Wait for me, Simon. You remember what Mama said," Benny called.

Mostly, Simon did remember. The Boston streets were too crowded and dangerous for his little brother to manage on his own. Mama had said more than once: "Simon, you're the big brother, yes? Be sure to watch out for Benjamin." Even though the brothers were just two years apart, Simon was much taller and faster.

He slowed down and waited for Benny, but when they got near the tenement that was home, he started running. He climbed the stairs two at a time, leaving Benny behind. Mama was at the oven, taking out the

fragrant braided loaf she'd made for the evening's special Sabbath meal. That was fortunate because she didn't notice that Simon came in alone, but then she turned around and saw Benny arrive, huffing and puffing and glaring at Simon. She set down the challah.

"Simon, Simon, so you can't wait for your little brother? His legs aren't as long as yours," she said as she pulled Benny to her and ruffled his thick dark curls.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I only ran ahead when we were close to home."

Mama shook her head and sighed. "Oh well, for you to be home, boys, is good. Rachel is ready to take baby Sophie out to catch some air. Air you boys also need, yes?" Simon and Benny's job was to take the carriage down the stairs. As they followed Rachel, Mama called after them, "Mind your sister now."

Getting down to the street wasn't an easy matter when you lived on the fourth floor of an old tenement. First went Rachel. As the oldest, she carried Sophie, of course. She carefully led them down each dark step and around each landing. The boys' job was to

bring down the big wicker baby carriage, Simon in front and Benjamin at the handle. Bump, went the carriage on each step. Bump! Bump! Bump! Past the milk bottles at the Levinson's door, past the smell of the toilet they shared with five other families. Simon thought they would never reach the bottom, but finally he saw the light of the front hallway. Whew! A few more bumps and they were out in the tumult of the city streets.

Even more than usual, on Friday afternoons crowds swarmed the sidewalks. Simon knew that huge boats crammed with immigrants arrived in Boston every week, bringing hundreds of families like theirs to settle into a few city blocks. Peddlers, delivery boys, and housewives jostled each other as they hurried past the shops.

As Rachel buckled the baby into her leather harness, Simon suddenly took off running, unable to be good another minute. "Yah-yah, Benny, you can't catch me!" he yelled over his shoulder, as he dodged around a boy carrying a huge pile of coats on his back. Benny raced after him, darting in front of a knife sharpener's pushcart.

"Boys, wait for me!" Rachel yelled as they dashed

off. "Simon! Benjamin! You heard what Mama said!"

But Simon kept going. He nearly tripped up a lady loaded with bundles but managed to slip around her by running along the curb, taking care not to step into the street, where huge wagons of every description lumbered by. Simon looked over his shoulder with a grin to see if Benny was following. Just then he glimpsed an ice wagon pulled by an enormous black horse draw over to the curb. At that very moment, his brother slipped off the curb and into the gutter. He had fallen under the horse!

"Oh, no!" Simon yelled. "Benny, don't move!"

Benny crouched right under the horse's belly, sobbing and clutching his forehead. By the time Simon got there, blood was trickling through Benny's fingers. Simon wanted to reach under the horse and drag his brother to safety, but the horse shifted nervously from one hoof to another. If he reached for his brother, the horse might step on Benny. Simon couldn't move, remembering Mama telling him that the little bent-over lady in their tenement had been stepped on as a child by a horse.

A crowd gathered as the driver climbed down from the wagon. He shook his head and muttered:

“Fool kids ... not the horse’s fault if a boy tumbles right under him ... gentlest horse in Boston.” The ice-man signaled to Benny to stay where he was, then reached up and grabbed the horse’s bridle. He stroked its glossy neck. The horse finally stood still, and the driver beckoned Benny to come out.

As Benny slithered out from between the horse’s powerful legs, Simon let out a ragged sigh. He felt dizzy and realized he’d been holding his breath the whole time. Rachel crouched beside Benny. She examined the gash over his eye. Simon jiggled the carriage to quiet Sophie, who had started to whimper.

Rachel’s touch was gentle as she wiped the blood away, but she lit into Simon. “Just wait ’til I tell Mama,” she warned. “Benny could have been killed. You are going to get it, Simon!” Simon squirmed and said nothing. What was there to say? Benny would never have fallen under the horse if I hadn’t dared him to catch me, he thought.

The driver took an ice pick out of his rubber apron and chipped off a big chunk of ice. “Hold this to your forehead, sonny,” he said, offering it to Benny. He didn’t seem mad any more. “That’ll keep

the swelling down, it will. Yer a little soldier, I can see.” Simon reached up and stroked the horse’s neck. The creature hadn’t meant to hurt Benny. He did seem like he wouldn’t hurt a fly. Benny too stroked the horse that had frightened him so.

Benny loves animals as much as I do, Simon thought, and sighed. Living in the city, they hardly ever got near an animal.

Rachel picked up baby Sophie, and they dragged the carriage back up the stairs to the flat.