

# RIDING THE RAILS TO HOME

A Newsie Rides The Orphan Train



Cleo Lampos

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Many thanks to those who  
believe in the message of this novel:  
Lynn Austin, Jane Rubietta, and  
Carl and Charlotte Petersen

This book is dedicated  
to children who face challenges  
that can be overwhelming.



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# Chapter 1

Stephen always ran away from trouble.

But today, trouble pursued him like a hungry feline stalking a frightened rodent.

Life on the streets revolved around this cat and mouse game, police versus homeless kids. Maybe that's why the officers referred to boys like him as street rats.

The persistent feet pounded the pavement behind him. Stephen ran faster. His life depended on this moment. On how well he used his speed and wits. The thought of going to the Tombs forced him to keep moving. He knew that he could be locked up for the crime of being homeless. That was a stark fact in his

world. Sometimes he figured he'd been beat since the day he was born. Twelve years ago.

Stephen dodged a horse drawn buggy in the street. Nearly collided with a pushcart of tomatoes steered by a bearded man. He hated making a mess for the vendors but there was no time to apologize.

The sound of the heavy boots of the police closed in on him.

Veering into an alley laden with trash, Stephen gasped for air. A high wooden wall blocked the exit. He glanced over his shoulder and spotted the two policemen right behind him.

Trapped!

With the agility of a feral cat, Stephen leaped at the fence, grasping the top with both hands. He dug his bare toes into small holes in the vertical boards and vaulted his wiry body up and over. His knickers caught on a jagged board on the way down. Another hole ripped in them. He landed on a pile of rags with a dull thud. Breathing shallow, he listened as the annoyed policemen sounded off from the other side of the barrier.

“Lost one. Those street urchins are fast.”

“We’ll teach them not to be breaking bottles at the dump.”

“Vandals. That’s what they are. Throwing rocks all day.”

*Why couldn't the police understand?* Stephen only threw rocks so he could perfect his pitch. He needed

to chase away the rats at night. *When a fellow sleeps out all night, he needs some self defense. Some of the guys practiced by using slingshots to hit cans. Wasn't the garbage at the dump free for the taking?*

“We caught the rest of those street urchins,” one of the policemen shouted through the wooden fence, “and we’ll catch you too. Send all of you to the Tombs, I say. Teach you not to break the law.”

Stephen knew that kids like him were worth a lot of payola. The more homeless kids sent to the Tombs, the more money the city brought in. A loud crash from the other side made him cringe. One of the policemen had overturned a barrel, spilling its clanking contents on the cobblestones.

“Prison is the only thing their kind understands!”

“Come on, let’s get back to that other group of ragamuffins. Get them to the station.”

Stephen waited, peering through a knothole in the fence. The policemen disappeared, their footsteps on the bricks lost in the city din. Once again, familiar street sounds filled the alley. The newsies hawking the evening editions. Housewives haggling over the price of eggplants. The incessant crying of babies.

Stephen held his hand on his side, pressing into his empty belly until the ache from overexertion lessened. If he had another chance, he’d go to the dump and do it all over again. *Just another day in the Five Points of New York City. Another day of beating the odds of getting*

*caught. His crime? Being put out of the tenement by his drunken father to live on the streets.*

Stephen picked his way through the rubbish, alert for the dark blue uniforms of policemen. At the end of the brick building, he glanced around. Silently, he slid into the press of people. A few pennies jingled in his coat pocket. Coins earned by helping the ragman load the wagon before the rock-throwing contest.

Molly would eat today.

Stephen bought a loaf of bread, tucked it under his arm, and slid through the crowded walkways. In minutes he arrived at the tenement where his mother, father and sister lived. Holding his breath at the stench of rotting garbage, he pushed open the heavy door. Shrieks of arguing children greeted Stephen into the stairway. His nose stung from the coal dust and smoke.

At the door to the third floor flat, he raised his hand to knock, hoping his father wasn't home, hoping his mother felt better.

The door opened a crack. Seven-year-old Molly peeked through, and then flung the door wide.

"Stephen!" She smiled and hugged him tight. He held out the bread to keep it from crushing. Molly grabbed the loaf from him and raised it triumphantly in the air. "Bread! Ma! Stephen brought bread!"

Stephen stepped in. His mother held up her hand in warning.

"Stop. Stay back." Mother spoke in short gasps. "I'm ill. Molly keeps away from me." She paused,

dragging in a ragged breath. “Bless her heart.” Stephen stared at his mother as she lay on a mattress on the floor, her hair matted. Her eyes gazed dully from gray sockets. “The neighbors. Take me to the hospital. After their supper. Must get well.”

*People go to the hospital to die, Stephen thought in alarm. Don't no one walks out alive from those places.*

“What about Molly?” Stephen worried about his sister all the time. How could he watch out for her on the streets? He barely managed to stay alive himself.

“Orphanage. Until I get better.” Mother’s voice grew weaker with every word. “I... will ...come... back.”

Stephen glanced at his sister. She avoided his eyes. *Molly must know the truth that Ma will not make it back from the hospital.*

“Molly, you and Ma have the bread. I’ve had food today.” He tried to ignore the rumbling in his stomach.

“Can’t eat,” Mother croaked. “Stephen, find your da. Tell him that I’m sick.” She struggled for air. “You know... where he is. Trust in God as you go, Stephen.”

Dread churned inside Stephen. He swallowed his fear of finding his father, but nodded. He started for the door, pausing when someone knocked from the other side. He opened the door to neighbors. The Murphys, their faces pinched in worry, looked like they were holding their breath. They entered with a stranger.

The tall man spoke first. “Good evening, Mrs. Reily. I’m sorry you are ill.” He nodded toward the

neighbors. “The Murphys will take you to the hospital. I am Thomas Harding, from the Children’s Aid Society Orphanage.” He squatted until he was at Molly’s eye level. “We’ll take good care of you while your mother gets better.”

Mr. Harding rose and faced Stephen. “You may be too old for the orphanage. But there are other institutions for the bigger boys.”

Stephen lunged for the open window and leaped onto the metal fire escape. The thought of living under the iron rule of an orphanage terrified him more than living on the streets. He shouted, “Ain’t nobody takin’ me. I take care of myself.” He stomped his feet on the metal grating, hoping it sounded like he was running down the stairs. Crouching out of sight, he listened through the window.

Mrs. Murphy spoke in her fast, lilting voice. “Now, Mrs. Reily. Here, let me help you get up.” Stephen heard groaning, shuffling. “There we go. Mr. Murphy, help her walk. Got everything, Molly?”

Mr. Harding’s spoke next. “Thank you for helping, Mrs. Murphy. Just one more thing. Cholera can spread. Gather up all the blankets and clothing. Will you burn them in the stove so no one gets the disease?”

Mrs. Murphy answered. “Aye, Mr. Harding. Poor thing.” She clucked her tongue.

Stephen heard Molly whimper.

“I’m right here, Molly. Be a good girl, now.” As Mrs. Murphy closed the door, Stephen heard her ask, “Who will tell their da?”

Their voices quickly blended with the noisy din of tenement life. Stephen climbed back over the window sill, back into the only home he had ever known. He tried to memorize every detail.

Two mattresses on the floor. A wooden back chair, where his ma sewed piecework for the factory late into the night. Had sewn, he corrected himself. Molly’s stool, where she threaded the needles for her mother. He turned around in the tiny room. The pot belly stove, the sink with water pump, the small table with four chairs. Every piece of furniture reminded Stephen of his mother’s love and sister’s affection. He swiped the back of his hand across his eyes and sucked in his breath.

When he saw the quilt covering his mother’s mattress, a sob escaped his lips. She’d pieced it from left-over scraps of suit material for a whole year. *Did Mr. Harding say to burn it?*

Stephen clenched his fists, then grabbed the scissors from his ma’s sewing basket, snipping a square from the bottom of the quilt. He folded the fabric and shoved it into the inner pocket of his tattered coat.

Looking around the room once more, he squared his shoulders. Mouthing a silent good-bye, he shut the door on pain and loss.

In the hallway, Stephen crept barefoot from shadow to shadow then down the stairs. He barely noticed the smell of frying bacon, boiling cabbage heads and rotting vegetable cuttings. From behind locked doors, couples argued, babies cried. Stephen shrugged. At least on the streets, he was free from the pain of life in the crowded buildings. Not that he had even been given a choice.

Back on the sidewalk, Stephen headed for Mulligan's Pub. *Would his da even care about Ma? Molly?* Stephen shook his head. All his da cared about was another pint of ale. Stephen dreaded confronting him. Stay out of range of his fists and boots, he reminded himself. He'd learned that after too many bruises and bloody noses.

Although the crowd of pushcart peddlers thinned as the sun lowered in the sky, the constant press of people continued. Stephen ducked between housewives with baskets of bread and fruit. He stayed out of the way of men who darted through the throng, eager to get to a place of rest after toiling on the barges or lifting kegs and crates all day. Stephen watched other homeless children who wove through the adults, hoping to lift a wallet or grab a loaf of bread to keep body and soul together for another night. He shook his head. His ma always told him that stealing was wrong.

A newsie called out the last edition's headline: "Utah admitted to the Union. New state from the far West. Read all about the state of Utah."

Even the clamor of the street failed to deaden the high-spirited laughter blasting from Mulligan's Pub. Stephen heard the pub before he saw it. Men quenching more than sorrow in pint after pint of ale. Drowning their very souls. A crowd gathered around two drunks at the entrance as they swung clenched, bare fists at each others' heads. The shouts of the spectators encouraged the fighters to claw even more. Stephen turned from the sport with a gnawing in his gut. He hated the fighting.

Stephen stepped into the pub.

Stale liquor assaulted his nostrils. His stomach rolled one turn. Elbowing along the bar, Stephen worked his way to the stool he knew his da always claimed. Since he'd barely been in his knickers, his ma used to send him to Mulligan's Pub. His mission was to beg Da to come home before he spent every penny on ale. That's when the lessons of the boots and fists started. If Da made it home, the beatings continued. At least living on the streets had meant fewer tangles with him.

A bearded drinker glanced over his shoulder at Stephen. "Hey, Reily. If it ain't your son sneakin' around on the floor."

"Stephen." The slurred voice of his da turned his name into a curse. "Did yer ma send ya to git me? Tell her I'll go home when I git good and ready, and I'm not there yet."

The men on either side of Reily roared with loud guffaws.

“I ain’t gonna tell her nothin’. The neighbors took her to the hospital. Cholera.” Stephen spat out the words, determined not to cry. “Took Molly to the orphanage. You ain’t at home to claim her. Why wasn’t you, Da?” His da raised his hand to strike Stephen, but he ducked, avoiding the slap.

“You was always a liar, Stephen. Your ma ain’t nothin’ but fine. Last time I saw her she was complainin’ about money. Never no time for me. Always sewin’. No, you’re lying. Ain’t nothin’ wrong. Now leave. Before you make me mad.” Turning his back on Stephen, Reily lifted his mug to his lips.

Stephen flinched at every false accusation. Didn’t his da see him?

The bearded man shoved Stephen into the sea of laughing, stumbling drunks. “Better leave, child. Reily don’t need no more lies to try to git him to go home.”

Stephen bolted for the door. No one would see him cry. Those drunks wouldn’t see the tears of a baby. By the time he reached the cobblestone street, anger had replaced humiliation. He gritted his teeth at the injustice of his father’s words. Why had he even thought that this time would be different?

*Why don’t he care? Even a little? What’d I ever do to make Da hate me so much?* Stephen clenched his fists tight and clenched his jaw even tighter. *What did Ma always say? “That isn’t your da talking, it’s the ale.”*

Standing on the cobblestone, Stephen's situation hit him like a frying pan in the face. Home had vanished. He hadn't slept there lately, but, still, it provided a getaway when life on the street proved too tough. Stephen reached into his inner coat pocket. The nubby suit fabrics in the quilt patch touched his fingers. The warmth of remembering his Ma's love pushed aside some of the anger.

"Hey, Stephen. Lookin' for a bite?"

Stephen looked up at the sound of his name. Bean, a tall rag-clad boy, grimaced as he held out an apple. Stephen knew Bean as one street kid knows another.

"Did ya steal it?"

"Ya know not to ask. What're ya, a law abidin' citizen?"

"No. I was taught never to steal. Me Ma's rule." Stephen fingered the cloth patch in his pocket as the rumblings in his stomach rolled on.

"Well, me own ma had different rules." Bean rolled the apple in his hand. "Me ma taught me never to starve."

Stephen shook his head, fighting the temptation. There had to be a better way to get a bite to eat. Glancing up and down the street, he saw a shopkeeper struggling to roll a barrel full of flour toward a nearby bakery. Poking Bean's arm, he motioned for him to follow. Bean tucked the apple into his pocket.

Stephen hurried down the street, stopping an arm's length from the white-aproned man with the barrel. "Lookin' for some strong arms to help out?"

"Maybe." The stocky baker wiped the sweat from his brow as he surveyed the lads. "Can you roll it to my shop?" He pointed half a block east.

"What'll ya give us if we do it?"

"From what I can see, you boys could use my wife's soup and bread. Deal?"

"Deal." Stephen placed his hands on the barrel, barely moving the wooden container. Putting his weight into it, Bean shoved it loose and the barrel started to rock. Pedestrians jumped aside as the boys careened down the cobblestone. Sweaty from work, they stopped the barrel beneath the awning of the man's shop.

"Good job, boys. Come inside for a bowl o' Irish stew and rye bread."

The bakery filled the front part of the building. Opening a door past the ovens, the man led the boys into a one-room tenement. "Two extra bowls, Etta. These boys saved my back."

The woman looked up from stirring a pot on a wood burning stove. She was as round as the barrel they had just rolled down the street. "Of course. Sit down, sit down." Etta ladled vegetables and meat into two large bowls. She placed a slice of rye bread on the side.

Stephen plunged a large spoon into the first warm meal he'd had in a long time. With every spoonful, he savored the broth. As the warmth of the stew reached

his stomach, his heart beat faster with hope. Carefully, he sopped the last drops of liquid with the bread. *What would it be like to always have enough to eat?*

Collecting their bowls and spoons, Etta headed for the wash pan. “Now, hurry along, lads. There is no place to sleep here. Get a good spot before the police catch you.”

Stephen’s spirits sank at the thought of finding a safe place to rest.

“Thank ya, ma’am. Thank ya Mister...” Stephen hesitated.

“My name’s Sean. God has blessed Etta and me. We give back if we can.”

*Ma said to trust God. Is this what she thought would happen? That he would meet good people?*

Stephen elbowed Bean. “Thank ya kindly,” Bean muttered as he led the way back to the congested street. Stephen heard the key turn in the bakery door’s lock after them.

“See, Bean. Ya don’t never have to steal. Sometimes ya just work for your eats.”

Bean pulled his apple from his coat pocket and bit into it, spraying Stephen with the juice.

