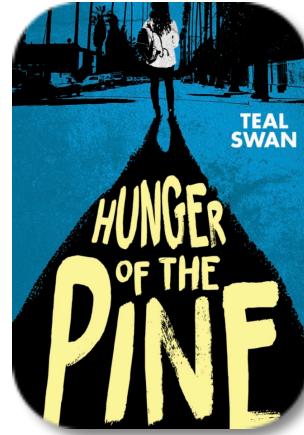


# Hunger of the Pine, a novel

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(a summary by Pat Evert)

It was better to actually be alone than to feel, like the proverbial exile, alone in a crowded room; the feeling of being the outcast. Aria Abbott was 17 years old to the day. She could not conform and she did not fit in, but she went to great lengths to avoid drawing negative attention to herself. Aria had no friends to speak of. **Loneliness graced the corridors of her life.** Aria didn't know where her real mother was. She had been taken by the state at seven years old. Aria watched her mother, Lucy, go through seemingly endless cycles. She would come home from school to find her mother manic, high with a kind of synthetic empowerment. On days like that, Lucy would drag Aria around the town, determined to show her a good time. But Lucy was delusional. All too often her enthusiasm would turn into aggression and she would find herself in altercations. These would push Lucy into a state of energized paranoia. The week before the state took her away, Aria could remember lying by her mother, who was passed out on the couch, staring at the track marks on her arm. It was the last time she saw her mother. The following years were a blur of group homes and foster homes.



Aria loved food. It was the only thing in her life without ulterior motives. She could trust food. She couldn't breathe in the emotional atmosphere of this house. It wasn't the presence of emotions that bothered her. It was the lack of them. It was the vacuum of those moments where **the surface veneer of a happy family sat like a film over the truth.** The truth was, it was all just one giant act. On some nights, when Mr Johnson could find an excuse to be absent from his wife, he would slip into bed with Aria. This wasn't the first time Aria had intentionally cut herself. It was a habit that she had successfully concealed for months before her younger brother caught her doing it. Aria was facing the possibility of being given up entirely. She was worth nothing to either of them. **Abandoned by one mother and hated by a second, and with a father who used her for his own idle pleasure without giving a damn.** Aria had run away from home. She didn't have the luxury of wondering why she, specifically, was the unlucky one who had wound up with this life, she cried tears as if she was attending her own funeral. There are times when the pain that someone faces is so great that the mind cannot wrap itself around it. The mind cannot dissect it to find meaning and it cannot analyze it to figure out how to avoid it in the future. Instead, the mind simply submits to the dizziness of it.

On the streets of Chicago she had found a mission that allowed vagrants to stay for three nights per month. The actual mission of the mission was to proselytize, self-

gratification oozing through their philanthropy. For the majority of them, it was obvious that their preoccupation with the homeless was in fact a preoccupation with using them. Using them to bolster their self-concepts as good people. Using them to bedazzle their résumés. Using them as write-offs for their companies; using them to increase the head counts of their congregations. And most of all, using them to secure their own place in heaven.

Here Aria met a gay, young man, Taylor, who was going to Los Angeles in the hopes of becoming an actor. He Invited her to come with him. She just needed \$200 for the bus fare, which she found in the church's offering dish.

They arrived at the Union Rescue mission. The area was called Skid Row. The scene that greeted Taylor and Aria was one they'd have expected to see on the television after a national disaster in a third world country – not on an ordinary night of the year in the United States. The street was lined with disheveled tents and makeshift plastic tarps, propped up over piles of clutter. Hundreds – maybe even thousands – of men, woman and children, rotting under the iron hand of poverty.

Aria was learning the hard way that life for anyone on the streets was not as free as she had once imagined because life on the streets was not safe. It was even less safe if you were a woman. Hypothermia, heatstroke, rape, violence, infection, sunburn, arrest, insanity, injuries with nowhere to go to treat them, hunger and malnutrition seemed to follow you when you lived out on the street.

Anthony had killed a man. When he was young, he had been a bucker at a logging company in Idaho. When he found out that his wife had been cheating on him with a man who worked beside him every day as a faller, he drove over to the man's house in a rage to confront him. He was charged with voluntary manslaughter and was sentenced to 17 years in prison. But to get a job, or buy a car, or qualify to rent an apartment, as a convicted felon had proved to be impossible. So, he turned to robbery and had spent his time since then in and out of jails. **He no longer felt wanted in society.** There was no way to transition from life behind bars to life outside them.

Aria tried prostitution once and wrote in her journal. "I fucked a man today. I am forever poisoned by it. No ... imprisoned by it. To be loved instead of fucked must taste like so much freedom that the lack of bars and chains alone would make you bleed. I'm not doing it again ... At least I hope not. I guess you never know what might happen. I have seventy-five dollars now, which I can't let anyone know about. It seems strange that homeless people steal from each other but whatever. There isn't anyone around to hear me cry about it. There is nothing special about fucking. I don't get why men like it so much. I want love."

Darren hated space. For Darren, space meant exposure, where attack could come from anywhere at any moment. Having clutter around him offered him enclosure and padding from potential threat. It was suddenly **something that he had used and was about to throw away the same way that the army had used him up and thrown him away.**

He couldn't stand it. Darren was terrified of losing his things or having someone take them away. The very idea of it threatened to reopen the scab covering his wounds. Aria felt sorry for Darren. Her own wounds allowed her to clearly see his.

Wolf, a Native American, had a deep wound, saying, **They annihilated over 100 million of us.** Ten times more people than Nazi Germany killed.

Aria's diet was causing her to crumble and her body told the tale. The idea that edible plants and especially weeds could be growing in **abundance all around her**, but that she didn't know enough to recognize them yet, opened up a whole new realm of possibilities. It opened up the possibility of feeling good. It opened up the possibility of not panicking about where her next meal would come from. And it opened up the possibility of not having to entangle herself so deeply in the humiliating, and strings-attached, dependence on other people's charity.

People who can't make ends meet just end up coping in whatever way they can. No one can take care of kids when they can't even figure out how to survive themselves. But no one helps them. They just come down and **take their kids away**, and that doesn't help them. It just makes their lives even harder 'cause now they're dying both inside and out. "Then they throw you in a group home, which is just a modern orphanage. You're under constant surveillance by the social workers and psychologists and courts, but **none of them really care about you**. You're just one big charity case that most people take advantage of so they can feel good about themselves. It's nothing but rules and regulations instead of love. Some foster parents are OK – the good ones just want you to behave yourself and act like everything is fine now – but a lot of them are even worse and more abusive than the parents they take kids away from to begin with. No one hears you or cares what you say you want or need. **They decide your life for you** and they tell you you're gonna see your parents again, but we all know it's a goddamn lie. And when you're like eighteen, **you just age out of the system with no support and no skills**, so a lot of 'em just end up repeating the same cycle. They follow in their parents' footsteps because there aren't any other footsteps to follow. The entire system is fucked."

Taylor was eating an oatmeal cookie that he had saved from the free lunch he had been given at the church. He chewed it while he talked. "I mean, I knew there was somethin' wrong with me when other boys wanted to start hangin' out with girls and I just wanted to hang out with them. I basically did everything in my power not to face it. I think I just felt so much shame I couldn't admit to it until I kinda had to, you know?" Given how effeminate he was and how out of the closet he seemed, it shocked Aria that Taylor was still so ashamed for people to know that he was gay.

The fire that had taken everything was a flicker compared to the forest fire of guilt that Aria felt, knowing that in a way, because she had been the one to report Ciarra, she was the one to blame for all this. The people standing next to her were the people in the world who were already the most powerless and already the poorest. Now, because of her decision, the only thing they had was their lives and whatever items they could grab

before running. What shard of safety Darren possessed had been taken from him. **The only relationships he had, which were with his things, were lost. Since he was a hoarder, it was a thousand times worse for him than it was for the rest of them.**

Instead, Aria headed in the direction of the Super Sun Market. She planned to wait across the street for him to emerge from the store in the morning. She was mutually falling in love with a young man from India, Oskar. “You never think you have a culture until you leave the place where your culture is the only culture. If I took you to India, you would all of a sudden know what American culture is. It’s like a fish that spends his life swimming in water. The fish doesn’t know how to tell you about water until he is suddenly in the air.”

Before Aria had become one of them, she had always looked at homeless people like they were “those people.” **Now, she understood that a life on the streets was just a hair’s width away from almost anyone.** Given the right cocktail of conditions, anyone could find themselves here. They, the outcasts of mankind’s ambition; the carriers of the shadows that no one truly wants to face. A boundless yearning for a kindness they had either tasted or never tasted. A deep hunger for love they might or might not ever find. Their lives were the hunger of the pine.

Aging out of the system was a nightmare in and of itself. Without a family and without any of the skills to make it on their own, the chances these older kids would graduate from school, much less college, were slim. The chances of them finding good employment were just as slim. So many of the kids who aged out of the system just ended up right back where they started … back in the clutches of substance abuse, back in trouble with law enforcement, back in poverty, out on the streets and with no social support. It was a vicious cycle that no one seemed to be able to stop.

“Police Fire 54 Shots, Report Finds It Reasonable,” the headline read. Aria continued reading. “It is unclear how many of those bullets struck Kendrik McCoy, a 22-year-old black man, but attorneys have said he was hit around 26 times. Kendrick was unarmed. He didn’t trust the police. Policing was the most enduring aspect of the struggle for civil rights. It had always been a **mechanism for racial control.** Stories of police harassment and violence in the black communities where he grew up were common. The faces of the police officers he feared were faces that belonged to **a larger system of inequality;** inequality in the justice system, inequality in housing, inequality in employment, inequality in education and inequality in health care.