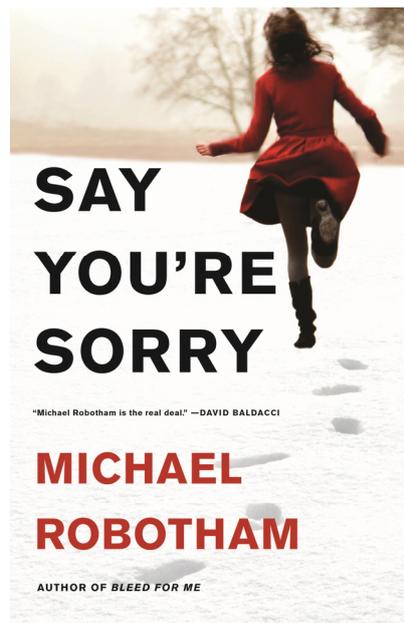


Say You're Sorry

By

Michael Robotham



'I recognise the moment I'm standing in. This is the moment before. This is the breath you take.'

John Bauer 'Rocks in the Belly'.

My name is Piper Hadley and

I went missing on the last Saturday of the summer holidays three years ago. I didn't disappear completely and I didn't run away, which is what a lot of people thought (those who didn't believe I was dead). And despite what you may have heard or read, I didn't get into a stranger's car or run off with some sleazy pedo I met online. I wasn't sold to Egyptian slave traders or forced to become a prostitute by a gang of Albanians or trafficked to Asia on a luxury yacht.

I've been here all along – not in Heaven or in Hell or that place in between whose name I can never remember because I didn't pay attention at Sunday Scripture classes. (I only went for the cake and the cordial.)

I'm not exactly sure of how many days or weeks or months I've been missing. I tried to keep count, but I'm not very good with numbers. Completely crap, to be honest, you can ask Mr Monroe, my old maths teacher, who said he lost his hair teaching me algebra. That's bollocks by the way. He was balder than a turtle on chemo before he ever taught me.

Anyone that follows the news will know that I didn't disappear alone. My best friend Tash was with me. I wish she were here now. I wish she'd never squeezed through the window. I know that's crazy, but every hour of waiting is like a year.

When you read those stories about kids who go missing they are always greatly loved and their parents want them back, whether it's true or not. I'm not saying that we weren't loved or missed, but that's not the whole story.

Kids who blitz their exams don't run away. Winners of beauty pageants don't run away. Girls who date hot guys don't run away. They've got a reason to stay. But what about the kids who are bullied or borderline anorexic or self-conscious about their bodies or sick of their parents fighting? There are lots of factors that might push a kid to run away and none of them are about being loved or wanted.

I don't want to think about Tash because I know it's going to make me cry. My handwriting is messy at the best of times, which is weird when you consider I won a

handwriting competition when I was nine and they gave me a fountain pen in a fancy box that bit my finger every time I closed it.

We disappeared together, Tash and me. That was a summer of hot winds and fierce storms that came and went like, well, storms do. It was on a clear night at the end of August after the Bingham Summer Festival, when the funfair rides had fallen silent and the coloured lights had been turned off.

They didn't realise we were gone until the next morning. At first it was just our families who searched, then neighbours and friends, calling our names across playgrounds, down streets, over hedges and across the fields. As the hours mounted they phoned the police and a proper search was mounted. Hundreds of people gathered on the cricket field, dividing up into teams to search the town and the surrounding fields and along the river.

By the second day there were five hundred people, police helicopters, sniffer dogs and soldiers from RAF Brize Norton. Then came the journalists with their satellite dishes and broadcast vans, parking on Bingham Green and paying locals to use their toilets. They did their reports from in front of the town clock, telling people there was nothing to report, but saying it anyway. This went on for days on every channel, every hour, because the public wanted to be kept up-to-date on the nothingness.

They called us 'the Bingham Girls' and people made shrines of flowers and tied yellow ribbons to lampposts. There were balloons and soft toys and candles just like when Princess Diana died. Complete strangers were praying for us, weeping as though we belonged to them, as though we summed up the tragedies in their own lives.

We were like fairytale twins like Hansel and Gretel or the babes in the wood, or the Soham girls in their matching Man United shirts. I remember the Soham girls because our school sent cards to their families saying our prayers were with them.

I don't like those old fairytales – the ones about children getting eaten by wolves or kidnapped by witches. At our primary school they took Hansel and Gretel off the shelves because some of the parents complained it was too scary for children. My dad called them PC Nazis and said next time they'd be saying Humpty Dumpty promoted violence against unborn chickens.'

My Dad isn't famous for his sense of humour.

As the days passed, the media storm blew through Bingham. Cameras came into our houses, up the stairs, into our bedrooms. My bra was hanging off the doorknob and there was an empty tampon box on my bedside table. They called it a typical teenager's room because of the posters and my collection of crystals and my photo-booth portraits of my friends.

My Mum would normally have gone mental about the house being so messy, but she mustn't have felt much like cleaning up. She didn't feel much like breathing by the look of her. Dad did most of the talking, but still came across as a man of few words, the strong silent type.

*They picked apart our last days, putting them together from fragments of information like one of those baby scrapbooks people keep. Every detail seemed important. What book I was reading: *Curious Incident* – for the sixth time. What DVD I last borrowed: *Sean of the Dead*. If I had a boyfriend: Yeah, right!*

Everyone had a story about us – even the people who never liked us. We were cheeky, fun loving, popular, hard working; we were straight-A students. I laughed my ass off at that one.

People put a shine on us that wasn't there for real, making us into the angels they wanted us to be. Our mothers were decent. Our fathers were blameless. Perfect parents who didn't deserve to be tormented like this.

Tash was the bright one and the pretty one. She knew it too. Always wearing short skirts and tight tops. Even in her school uniform she was striking with breasts like hood ornaments that announced her arrival. They belonged to a grown woman, a lucky woman, a woman who could model bras or be draped over the bonnet of a sports car at a motor show. She lapped up the attention like a kitten, rolling the waistband of her skirt to make it shorter, undoing the top button of her blouse.

At fifteen a girl's looks are pretty fickle. Some blossom and others play the clarinet. I was skinny with freckles, a big old head of tangly black hair, a pointy chin and the eyelashes of a lama. My assets hadn't arrived, or had been delivered to someone else.

Instead I was built for speed. Blink and I'd be on the other side of the room. I was a runner – second in the nationals for my age group. I was part whippet,

according to my father. Homely, my grandmother said. Bookish was my mother's description. They could have said plain as a pikestaff, but I don't know what a pikestaff looks like.

Tash had the ugly duckling story with the happy ending, while I was the duckling who grew into a duck. Put another way, if I were in an actress in a horror movie, I'd be the one who gets killed off in the opening scene. The moment I appeared on screen, you'd be thinking, 'She's toast.'

Tash's family lived in an old farmhouse half a mile from Bingham, along a narrow lane that is just wide enough for single cars or tractors. Mr McBain rented the farm, hoping to buy it, but he couldn't raise the money.

I remember my mother saying the McBains were white trash, something I never really understood. A lot of people rent houses and send their kids to public schools, but that doesn't make them any more fucked up than the rich people living in Priory Corner.

That's where we live in the house called 'The Old Vicarage' because it's where the vicar used to live before the church sold it off. The streets of Priory Corner aren't paved with gold, but the neighbours act as though they should be.

Like everyone else in town, they put up posters in their windows and stickers on their cars after we disappeared. There were candlelight vigils and special masses at St Mark's.

Millions of words were written in the newspapers – page after page about nothing.

You're probably wondering how I know these things. During those first few days George let us watch TV and read the papers. We were chained up in some attic with sloping ceilings and a skylight. It was airless and hot beneath the tiles, not like this place. There was a bed and an old TV with a coathanger as an aerial.

On the third day, I saw mum and dad on the TV, looking like rabbits caught in a high beam. Mum wore her pencil black dress by Alexander McQueen and a dark pair of half-pumps. Tash knew the brand. I'm not very good with designer clothes. Mum was clutching a photograph. She'd found her voice and they couldn't stop her talking.

She listed all the clothes I might have been wearing, as though I might have dropped them breadcrumbs leaving a trail for people to follow. Then she paused and stared at the TV cameras. A tear hovered halfway down her cheek and everyone waited for it to fall, not listening to what she said.

Mr and Mrs McBain were also at the news conference. Mrs McBain hadn't bothered about make-up...or sleeping. She had bags under her eyes and was wearing a T-shirt and an old pair of jeans.

'Like something the cat dragged in,' said Tash.

'She's worried about you.'

'She always looks like that.'

My dad took a shaky breath, but the words came out clearly.

'You can't imagine what Piper means to us,' he said. 'We're a strong family and we don't survive well apart. We need her home now. Somebody out there must have seen her and Tash. Maybe you don't think you did. But if you saw two girls that day, ring the police. Try very hard to remember.'

He looked directly into the cameras. 'If you took our babies, please just bring them home. Drop them off at the end of the road or leave them somewhere. They can catch a bus or a train. Let them walk away.'

Then he spoke to Tash and me.

'Piper, if you and Tash are watching. We're coming to find you. Just hold on. We're coming.'

Mum had panda eyes from her mascara running.

'Whoever you are – we forgive you. Just send Piper and Tash home.'

My sister Phoebe was put in front of the cameras wearing her prettiest dress. She stood pigeon-toed, sucking her fingers and Mum had to prompt her with her line.

'Come home, Piper,' she said. 'I want you to play with me.'

Tash's father had his arms crossed through the whole circus. He didn't say anything until at the very end when a reporter asked, 'Haven't you got anything to say, Mr McBain?'

He stared at the reporter forever, before saying, 'If you still have them, let them go. If they're dead, tell somebody where you left them.'

Something broke inside Tash's mum and she made this small, frightened

animal sound, like a kitten squeaking in a box.

There were rumours about Mr McBain after that. Where was his emotion? Why did he suggest we were dead?

Apparently, you're supposed to quiver and blubber at news conferences. It's like a law of nature, otherwise people think you might have raped and murdered your daughter and her best friend.

I didn't watch the TV any more. No matter what channel you switched on, our parents were there, staring out of the screen, pleading for information. They held up the photograph. That picture became famous. It's the one everyone remembers – taken by Mr Quirk our school photographer (he of the wandering hands and minty breath who is notorious for straightening collars, brushing skirts and feeling boobs).

In the photograph Tash and I are sitting together in the front row of our class. Tash's skirt is so short she has to keep her knees together and her hands on her lap to avoid flashing the camera. Flashing the flash, so to speak.

I'm next to her with a mop of hair and a fake smile that would make Victoria Beckham proud. That's the photograph everybody remembers: two girls in school uniform, Piper and Tash, the Bingham Girls.

At the candlelight vigil Reverend Trevor led the prayers while his wife Felicity led the gossiping. She's like one of those dippy birds with a bulbous arse that rocks back and forth, putting her nose into private conversations.

She and the Reverend have a son called Damian who should have a cross carved in his forehead because he belongs to the dark side. The little shit likes to creep up behind girls and flick their bra straps. He never did it to me because I'm quicker than he is and I once shoved his asthma inhaler up his nose.

There was standing room only at St Mark's. They had to put loud speakers outside so people could hear the prayers and the hymns. The only thing missing were the children. Parents were so scared of their babies being taken away that they kept them at home, safely tucked away.

That was the weekend that the grief tourists began arriving. People drove from Oxford and beyond, circling the streets. They went to the church and stared at our school and at the Old Vicarage where they said we were last seen.

Then they watched the reporters talking breathlessly to cameras, doing 'nothing has happened' reports in front of the town clock. Desperate for a new angle, they began picking the scabs off past tragedies, tossing out names like Holly Wells, Jessica Chapman and Sarah Payne, filling a few more hours with nothing.

Meanwhile, the tourists watched and then drove away looking slightly disappointed. They wanted Bingham to be more sinister, a place where teenagers disappeared and didn't come home.