



Routes 1&9

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Sam Carter

The girl went missing five years ago on a Tuesday, June 25, and we heard about it the next day. The family had gone out looking for her, then sat up all night waiting for her to come home. She was nine, and so she could've run away. She was old enough. I ran away from home when I was ten, myself. Came back after sundown weeping like a baby. The girl didn't come back, though, and that's when they called us.

I was sitting in the grass median along 230. I was supposed to be working a speed trap but mostly I was just smoking and listening to the morning news. It was hot already and the sun wasn't even fully up. I was listening to last night's scores when Helen came on the police band and told me to drive on out to Sand Road. Sam was already there.

All the houses along Sand Road look the same, just these little ramshackle wooden boxes with no yards to speak of and lots of dead cars and roosters all over the place. No trees for shade, no sidewalks. It was the last road the county paved, and if we ever had any trouble 9 times out of 10 it was there.

It was Mexican, and poor as hell. Break your heart to look inside those houses.

I saw Sam's cruiser pulled up halfway into the yard. There was an early morning crowd of women and kids standing a

respectful distance across the road, looking at the house and the car real quiet. They were all half-naked and not in any hurry to get dressed, eight o'clock on a Wednesday morning.

Anyway, I got out and walked up to the house in question. It wasn't any worse than the rest. I took off my hat before I entered. You don't want to be rude.

Sam was sitting at a little round kitchen table with a cup of coffee in his hand and Chief Deputy Glen Baxter was leaning against a door jamb. There was a woman sitting at the table across from Sam, smoking and crying, and a guy sat next to her. He was doing his best to comfort the woman, but he was pretty upset himself. There were a few kids running around, and an old lady that I guessed was the woman's mother. There was all sorts of Catholic stuff on the walls, crosses and the like.

It was a clean house, cleaner than most. They looked like they were really trying. In the next room there was a TV blasting away.

"Sam," I said. "Glen."

"Robbie." Glen kind of looked up at me and nodded but Sam sat still. He had his hat resting on one knee.

I don't speak Spanish, I guess I should. Half the town is Mexican and just about all our business is Mexican, if you get my meaning, but I don't speak it myself. I never had a gift for

languages. Anyway, I didn't know exactly what these folks were saying to each other, but I could catch the drift. I had been worried driving over that the mother was going to be hysterical or something, but she wasn't. She was more angry than anything, and I was afraid for that little girl if she came waltzing in right then. That was what I was thinking, 'Boy, is that girl going to catch hell when she comes home.'

Sam does speak Spanish, though, and he was talking to the family. He held his hand out, palm to the ground, and lifted it up and down. He was trying to figure out the girl's height.

"Aqui?"

"Abajo."

He lowered his hand.

"Aqui?"

"Abajo."

When his hand was about right he just looked down at the invisible space in between. She was tiny, just over four feet.

"She's nine, Sam? Is that right?" Glen asked.

"Nueve?"

"Si, Nine."

Glen wrote it down.

We got a description, some photos, and left. Sam never touched his coffee. I followed Glen outside and by now there was a much bigger crowd standing around. The cruisers attract attention.

"I'll meet you boys at the station," Sam called back to us, walking towards the crowd. "We'll sort it out there."

I got in my car and turned on the AC. It was really boiling at this point. I pulled out of Sand Road straight into the sun.

There are twelve officers total on the McLennahan County Sheriff's Department, not counting two on the civilian staff. We're local boys mostly and a few from outlying areas. By the time we'd made it back to the station just about all of us were there, yawning and scratching in the conference room. The walls were lined with portraits of all the county's previous sheriffs, stretching back to 1856.

"All right, gentlemen. Listen up." Sam came charging in and the boys sat up real fast. "Robbie, who's not here?"

"Stiles. He's gone the whole week."

"Fine. The rest of you, listen up. I'm passing around photographs of the girl we're looking for. Her name is Salina Pagan. She's nine years old. She's got black hair, brown eyes, dark complexion. She's somewhere between four and five feet tall, closer to four. She was last seen wearing a blue sundress

with dinosaurs on it. She was last seen in the vicinity of Sand Road at six o'clock last night. She was playing in her yard. I don't think she's far, and I want her found. I want you all to drive around until you find her. I want you to stay in touch with each other over the police band. I would like this situation resolved today, this morning if possible. Thanks and good luck. Now get going."

We got down to work. We broke down the county into four quadrants right there in the room. Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, Southwest. Three officers were assigned to each area, and me and Glen were placed in charge of them. We cut the county down the middle. I took the Western half of the county and Glen took the East.

It's flat and sandy in our part of the state. It's hard not to see a kid in a blue dress.

On the morning of Day Two the flyers went up, they just sprung up out of nowhere. Video stores, the 7-11, the library, all the stores along Main. Down Sand Road there was one stapled or taped to every telephone pole. Sam had cleared an area of the conference room corkboard and put one of those flyers smack-dab in the middle of it.

The local radio stations started reporting her missing that same morning. Helen was getting a few calls from the local

papers. Somebody had even set up a web site. We still weren't finding the girl.

The day came and went. The night crew took over from the day crew. Some of us just stayed up, I don't think Sam slept at all. We'd pull up in the Safeway parking lot, pull up nose to rear so we could talk without shouting. That was our rendezvous spot, right in the center of town.

"Anything?"

"No, you?"

"Not a damn thing."

Sam was firing both barrels. He'd check in with us all on the police band, meet up sometimes in the parking lot, drive around, and be on the phone in his office with the door closed. Through the window you could see him pacing around his desk. He was calling everybody he could think of, from Austin to Washington. He'd go visit her family twice a day.

Sam had two boys himself, but they lived with their mother up near Denver and he hardly ever saw them. There was a step-dad in the picture now and Sam just worked all the time. A town needs its sheriff.

On Day Three the Rangers came in. They sat in Sam's office, drank our coffee, and asked to see our files to date. Sam asked me to leave. I didn't take it personally, I left. Let

them hash out some sort of agreement, they don't need me for it. Later on, after an hour or so, everybody gathered in the conference room.

"We're all working together on this. We're all after the same thing," Sam said. The Rangers sat together at the end of the table and nodded. "This is now a criminal investigation."

"You hearing anything?"

"Couple things, yeah."

Glen was sitting in his cruiser with the window down. His big hand was resting on top of his steering wheel. I could see my own face staring back at me in his sunglasses.

"Like what?"

"Well, for one thing I heard the Rangers are setting up shop in Sam's office."

I could tell he was pissed about that.

"Uh-huh."

"Gonna question everybody all over again, beginning with the family. Started this morning."

Glen coughed and spit on the pavement between our two cars. He's a good guy, hell of a cop, but a little rough around the edges.

"That's about it. You?"

"Not even that much, Buddy."

"It's one of these locals, Robbie. I'll bet you twenty bucks. One of these Sand Road locals."

They started bringing in the family. We're not really set up to do much interrogating, so they had to come in one at a time. Sam didn't want to drag the mother in at all but the Rangers insisted.

Meanwhile our boys combed the highways and bi-ways, interviewed gas station attendants and mailmen. Volunteer groups helped search through fields and riverbeds. A guy with a helicopter flew down from Jefferson to search from the skies.

Yellow ribbons started going up around town, I don't know who came up with that. The trees along Market and Main were all wrapped in them. Kids were having nightmares. Parents were worried. Different versions of the story were going around. There was a serial killer, the girl was kidnapped. It was the middle of summer vacation and all the kids were locked up in their houses, watching TV.

Our families were real good about it. We hardly ever saw them, Sam had us working impossible hours. I'm not

complaining, I've never been afraid of hard work. Sam, though, wasn't looking so good himself.

It was almost a week and we still didn't have anything. Time was flying. Sam and the Rangers kept interviewing people and letting them go. After that first week people started grumbling about us, about the department. People wanted results that just weren't coming in. I'm glad I didn't know that at the time.

Everybody started looking at the mother's boyfriend, this guy Victor, real careful after that first week. He was a stable hand, worked over at Kensington Farms along 77. He lived with the family for a year or more, lived along Sand Road forever. He was from Guatemala or something.

Glen thought it was him straight off, but I didn't think so. I remembered him in the kitchen that first morning and he was all torn up. Sam was taking kind of a wait-and-see attitude. I have no idea what the Rangers were thinking. They dealt with Sam if they dealt with any of us. Mostly they just kept to themselves.

It was Day Six when they brought in Victor, nice as pie. He was drinking a soda in the yard when they came for him. He brought it with him and finished it in the back of the cruiser. Glen told me that. Glen hated that guy from the get-go.

They let him go after a couple of hours and the search continued. I found out that something like six hundred kids went missing in our state that year alone, I had no idea. Parents stole them from each other, mostly, but a lot just vanished.

I was driving along 77 in the middle of the night, not really going too fast but going fast enough. I wasn't looking out for the girl at that point, we'd searched that piece of road twice already that week. She wasn't there.

I had the police band on low, there wasn't anything happening anywhere. A couple of the boys across the county thought they saw something but it wasn't anything. When they got out of their cars to take a look there was nothing there. Just their minds playing tricks on them. Everybody was worn out.

There was a breeze coming in and you could smell the ocean on it. I kept my window rolled down and sniffed the air. It was a beautiful night.

"Robbie. Robbie, you out there?"

It was Glen. I picked up the handset.

"Yeah, you bet."

"Hey, we could use you over here, Buddy."

“Where’s that?”

“Crossroads Mall. C’mon out, we need a hand.”

I turned around right there on the road and hit the lights.

When I got there I saw a whole mess of cars, with Sam’s cruiser right there in the middle. Glen’s was close to it, and both had their lights flashing.

About six high school boys were milling around, nervous. One boy stood with his hands cuffed behind his back. A couple of the kids had bloody noses, some had torn up t-shirts. There were beer cans on the ground.

I pulled up to Glen and rolled down my window.

“What the hell’s going on?”

Glen whistled and nodded his head at the kids.

“Fight broke out, woman from the Dairy Barn called it in.”

I looked the kids over. I knew just about every one of them from the varsity wrestling team. They all looked scared.

“What kind of a fight?”

“Just a fight, rough-housing,” Glen shrugged. “You know.”

“Shit...”

“Sam got here first.”

I could see a couple more kids in the back of one of the cars. I counted nine altogether, six boys and three girls.

“Where is he?”

“Dairy Barn, talking to the woman.”

I got out of my car, I didn’t know what else to do.

“Bobby?”

Bobby Cunningham had a bloody nose and he looked pretty shook up. He was a big kid, but his voice was shaky and his eyes were wide. He was starting to tear up a little. Sam stood right up close to him like a drill instructor.

“Yes, Sir?”

“What’s going on here?”

“Nothing, Sir. Just the, uh...we just had an argument.”

“You and the Westwood boys?”

“That’s right. Uh-huh.”

“You all been drinking, Bobby?”

“Uh...yes Sir. Just beer.”

“Just beer,” Sam repeated.

“Yes, Sir.”

“And this is just a friendly fight, is that right?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Bobby. You know I got a missing girl out there, don’t you? You know I’m supposed to find that missing girl? Whole damn town’s counting on me to find that missing girl?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You know that. Well, that’s good. Bobby, isn’t this your team? You made captain this year, am I right?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“So I guess I should hold you responsible for all this mess, huh?”

“No, Sir! We were all just hanging out, it just kind of happened. Nobody...”

“Bobby, I don’t care! I do not give one good goddamn! You are wasting my time, you are wasting my officers’ time...”

Bobby was really crying by now.

“And I’m placing you under arrest.”

We all stood still. Bobby doubled over a little, trying to hide his face. Strings of blood and snot were hanging from his nose. He was shaking a little and sniffing as best he could. There was nothing else he could do with his hands cuffed behind his back.

“You hear me?”

Bobby didn’t say anything.

“You hear me, Bobby?”

Bobby nodded.

“Yes, Sir.”

“We’ll call up your daddy in the morning, but tonight you’re going to jail.”

“Sam...” Glen started to say something and Sam whipped his head around quick. He shot Glen one hell of a mean look and Glen shut up pronto.

“The rest of you, y’all go on home. I don’t want to see you out here again.”

It was nearly dawn and the sky was turning from blue to pink. The stars were starting to fade. Glen and I were the last ones still on the scene, and we were getting ready to go home. I’d bought us two coffees from the Dairy Barn and handed one to Glen there in the parking lot.

“Hey, Buddy.”

Glen nodded and took the coffee.

“Thanks.”

“Long night, I guess.”

“What the hell was that?” Glen turned to me.

“I know.”

“I mean, what in the hell was that? John Cunningham is a friend of mine. What am I supposed to tell him?” Glen’s eyes were bloodshot and his face was red.

We just sat there for a long time, leaning up against the hood of my car, staring out at the long grass along the edge of the parking lot.

“The sooner we resolve this shit the better,” he finally said.

After that, I don’t know. Things happened really fast. The Rangers had brought in Victor again, and this time they kept him. We didn’t know what went on in the interrogation room. Sam would go in there sometimes but he wasn’t talking.

We weren’t looking with the same intensity that we started off with, to tell you the truth. Nobody was giving us any kind of orders. Any interest the news might have had for the case died down, and pretty soon we were on our own.

Sam was letting his cruiser idle in the Safeway parking lot when I got there.

“Well?” he asked me.

“The boys are betting on that Victor fella.”

“Maybe.”

“Or some stranger.”

“Yeah.”

“Or she fell down a well. Shit, Sam, I don’t know.”

“I’ve got parents calling me all day. I got these Rangers breathing down my neck. One little girl...”

“Yeah.”

“And I’ve got no idea what to tell them. No clue, Robbie. I’m supposed to talk in their damn church tomorrow...” he drifted off. “What’s Glen saying?”

I looked up at him. He was squinting back at me carefully.

“Nothing, Sam. What do you mean?”

“To the other guys, I mean. Or the Rangers. Is Glen saying anything?”

“No, nothing, Sam. Not a thing.”

“Let me know, OK? Let me know if you hear anything.”

Sam turned and looked straight out his windshield.

“Yeah, you bet, Sam. You bet.”

I took off out of there after another minute. When I looked in my rear-view mirror I saw Sam sitting there, watching me go.

Victor broke down and confessed to the abduction and everything that same night, after two days with the Rangers.

He told them what he did to her and where he did it. He told them where they'd find her. She was right under our goddamn noses. I must've driven past that spot a hundred times in those few days, and she was right there in the Southwest quadrant. In my goddamn quadrant.

We had looked in those fields, or some volunteer group did anyway. We looked all over that farm. But she was there, just kind of tucked away. And we didn't find her. And Victor didn't confess to Sam. He waited until Sam left, he even asked if he could talk to those guys alone, before he confessed. He knew what he was doing, it was the State's arrest.

She wasn't dead when he left her, that was the thing. The doctor up in Houston said she could've been alive three more days. Three days.

They found her where Victor said they'd find her, sure enough. The Rangers got there first, then me and Glen, then Sam. By the time Sam pulled up we'd all seen her already. I won't tell you the condition she was in, you don't need to know that. I will tell you I wanted to keep Sam from seeing it. I wanted to knock him down to the ground to keep him from seeing her.

It wouldn't have done him any good. I thought that then and I was right. But he just marched straight past us, leaving his car door open. I called out his name as he passed by but

he didn't even turn his head. He just walked straight ahead and disappeared into the stables.

I don't see much of Sam Carter these days. He's still got the house but since he retired I don't think I've seen him more than five times. He does a lot of fishing up around Lake Sabine, so I guess that's part of it. He never sets foot back in the station house, though. He just cleaned out his desk and didn't look back. When Glen moved in the office was spotless, like he'd never been there at all.

That was probably the worst I've seen on this job, but I haven't really seen that much. And that's fine by me. That suits me fine.

Sam Carter from *Routes 1&9*, a collection of short stories.

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