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## Theft, Lies, And Videotape

By Jill Newman Iversen

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I am at a loss to explain the police department in Santa Monica, so will share with you my personal experience with them—and let you make up your own mind.

Several months ago, I sent my son three boxes of presents to his home in Santa Monica for his birthday. I live in New York City and paid for priority mail and two-day delivery. When the boxes didn't arrive as scheduled, my son contacted the local authorities and, as required, filed an official complaint with the postal inspector and Santa Monica police.

The police took their time about meeting with my son—they were far too busy with “serious” stuff like ordering take-out at Sushi Roku—but ultimately took down the particulars of the theft, assigned a detective to the case, and asked me, as the sender of the packages, to provide an itemized list of their contents. Fortunately, they all added up to over \$1,000—I say “fortunately,” because, despite the monetary loss, that meant the police had three years to find “their man”—as

opposed to one year for anything of lesser value—and as I was to discover, even that wouldn't be enough time for the police to get their act together.

Meanwhile, the manager at my son's apartment complex informed us that owing to a rash of mail robberies on her premises, a video camera had been set up over the delivery area, and the entire incriminatory incident had been filmed from start to finish. I couldn't have been more delighted. When the videotape was screened, in fact, you could see as clear as day (which was in fact when the robbery had taken place: at 4:19 p.m. and 48 seconds, to be precise) the faces of the two people who had stolen my son's presents—one a white blond woman in what looked like her early thirties; the other a young black man who could have been in his late teens. You could also see the two of them transporting the three boxes from the mail area to the back of their car, loading them into the trunk where other stolen packages had already been stored, and—mirabile dictu—flashing the license plate of their car as they drove obliviously away.

Piece of cake, I thought to myself: They've got a picture of the culprits. They've got a tape of their committing the theft, and they have the license plate of their car. An open-and-shut case. *Fait accompli*. End of story. Boy, was I ever wrong. Several weeks later, I learned that although my son contacted the authorities a number of times—both police and postal inspectors—there were no new leads in the proceeding, and they were no closer to arresting the individuals in question than they were on the day they opened the case. Finally, I myself called.

The detective—one Carlos Jaén—was unfailingly polite and respectful, but the only information I gleaned during the entire time we spoke was that the police department was “working on it.”—a mantra, as I would come to realize, after continual and meaningless repetition—that could mean absolutely everything—or, as was probably true in this case, nothing at all. I pressed the detective over and over again for more information, but that was his continual response: “We're working on it...we're working on it...” I asked why in three months' time there had been no arrests made or any developments whatsoever in the case. I mentioned that there was a similar robbery in my apartment complex in New York during the same time period, and though the robber was videotaped, they didn't have a license plate for his car as was true with my son's case, yet within five days he was within police custody. Jaén applauded the New York police profusely for their achievement as if they had accomplished some unusual act of heroism instead of conducting what I would have thought was a routine arrest.

I asked the detective why nothing had been done about following up with the license plate of the car of the two thieves who had stolen my son's packages. Jaen said it was evident from their investigation that the car was registered to someone other than the two people who had committed the theft. I said that clearly, the car owner had to know the people who had used his car on that day (unless it had been stolen or belonged to—what?—the mayor of Santa Monica or the police chief?!). No, said the detective—and again all he would volunteer was the cryptic “we're working on it,” and—the equally mysterious—“we don't want to tip our hand.” Tip your hand about what? I pressed. To whom? To the car owner? To the thieves? Why, I insisted, would that even matter? Well, said the detective, they didn't want the thieves to flee. Oh? said I. Three months had already passed since the packages had been stolen. For all they knew, the thieves were already on their way to Utah, Timbuktu, or a Wrinkle in Time. What's more, how could the most routine “follow-up” investigation be considered “tipping their hand”? Didn't they always

contact a car owner when a vehicle had been involved in a crime? Wasn't that the customary "next step"? Too obvious to even bear mentioning. The mind boggled.

Jaén then suggested that they were waiting for the two thieves to act again. What, I muttered? This was bringing inanity to the brink of insanity. Were they really waiting for the two criminals to make off with someone else's packages and did they hope to have a police official standing by who could not only identify them as the two individuals who had stolen my kid's packages several months earlier but witness enough wrongdoing to make an arrest that would stick? The likelihood of that, I thought to myself, was about as good as winning the Power Ball. Twice.

My most telling communiqué with the detective, however, was yet to come. I suggested—actually half in jest—that the thought had come up to post a picture of the two culprits on social media and ask if anybody could recognize them. I was even considering offering a reward for information leading to their arrest. The detective seemed to think this was a pretty good idea. He acknowledged that the police department could never do such a thing—a violation of "standard procedure," natch—but I was perfectly welcome to do so if I thought it might pan out. Huh? I again wondered. What about "tipping my hand." Wouldn't that give the whole thing away and telegraph to the thieves that not only did we know who they were but, in the case of their car, literally have their number? I even wondered if it might not be a bit dangerous to myself or my son to show "our hand" like this, and perhaps the police were better equipped—make that "protected"—to move in for the kill? Again, all I got was the same repeated noncommittal statement, "We're working on it...we're working on it," said Detective Jaén, as if that might provide some kind of reassurance or put all my unease to rest instead of raising a thousand other doubts. So here's my final question de jour, which I address to you, dear reader, if not to the largely (in)active members of your local police force: I wonder how much it costs to rent a couple of billboards outside Santa Monica, California....

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