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# It's no wonder we're all having to turn Poirot

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**Finding a stolen bag, I assumed the police would want to return it to its owner. How wrong I was**



Panda, my cockapoo, taking his morning constitutional, sniffed the black backpack in the gutter, while I blinked sleepily at its contents, strewn across our southwest London cul-de-sac. It was clearly the aftermath of a crime. A thief had rifled the bag for valuables and discarded it.

My own inveterate absent-mindedness gives me a particular interest in lost property. I felt sorry for the owner and cross with the thief. The corpus delicti comprised: sports kit, some cash, a mobile phone case with built-in battery, nice (German) reading glasses, earphones, upmarket (male, Moroccan) toiletries, and a business card for a film-maker called Olivier Hess. I phoned him. It wasn't his bag. A key, numbered 91, on a green rubber wristband, suggested a locker. I tried some local gyms. No joy.

Later that day, a police constable appeared in our street (in itself a notable occurrence). He looked scornful. No, he couldn't take custody of the bag. And if I took it to the police station myself? "We'd just throw it in the bin. We don't do lost property any more." I persisted. Had there been any break-ins to cars, burglaries, muggings or similar in the past 24 hours? I was not expecting DNA matches and fingerprinting, but it might well be possible to at least reunite the property with its owner. Another "no", this time delivered with irritation, not just boredom.

I checked. Such trivia are now, officially, indeed beneath the majesty of the law. Since October last year, the police in England and Wales have stopped handling routine lost property (guns, drugs and similar hot-ticket items are excepted). You can report a lost item on a website called [Reportmyloss.com](http://Reportmyloss.com), at £4.95 a time. But there is now no way for the public-spirited citizen to report found property. A hateful phrase from my schooldays — finders keepers, losers weepers — has become public policy.

Amid my irritation, the spirit of Hercule Poirot rose in my breast. Perhaps inspection of the contents and some cunning might be enough to track down the owner.

I posted a picture of the key on Twitter. Maybe someone would recognise it. I found a digital exercise bracelet at the bottom of the bag. Hacking into it might reveal enough personal data to track down the owner. But doing that might be illegal. I thought about phoning the German optician. He might keep records of his customers. I looked again at the earphones: a custom-made Jerry Harvey set used by professional performers and costing many hundreds of pounds. There might be a serial number inside. But I might break the device while looking for it.

They came in a fancy cylindrical container, engraved with the manufacturer's logo and other details, including the words "Basil Isaac". Something flickered at the back of my mind. That did not sound quite right as a brand name. But could it be a person? I tried Mr Hess, of the visiting card. Yes, he knew a Basil Isaac, and had his mobile number. A few minutes later, a grateful if slightly bemused percussionist arrived to collect his belongings. He had briefly dropped into our nearby jazz club the evening before to watch a friend perform. Someone had smashed the rear window of his car and grabbed his bag, dumping it in our road just a block away.

Mr Isaac had indeed promptly reported the theft — one of 280,000 such thefts from vehicles every year — to the police, chiefly for the crime number needed for his insurance claim. He had even asked if there was any chance of getting his bag back. The system had let him down.

While I was still digesting this, the police officer reappeared at the end of our road. I seized my chance. But the amateur's little grey cells are equally unappreciated by the professionals in real life as in Agatha Christie's fiction. The constable shrugged at my excited account of the case. He was unaware of any robbery that might (he intoned sceptically) have been reported locally. Nothing had been done. Nothing would be done. Nothing could have been done.

Reuniting people with their possessions, whether lost from foul play or carelessness, should be part of public service. It does not deserve such an off-hand response.

My ire was heightened by our experience in Italy a week later. At Milan station we discovered we were minus my daughter's suitcase: stolen or mislaid — we were not sure which — either on the train or at the airport. It contained nothing valuable, but its loss was inconvenient. We began glumly working out how to replace the missing contact lenses, pills and other bits and pieces.

A few minutes later, my wife's phone rang. In faultless English, the carabinieri at Milan airport wanted to know if we had lost a bag. One had been handed in, and a little detective work at their end had provided her number.

Like the Metropolitan Police, the carabinieri doubtless have more important (and exciting) things to worry about than the trivial conveniences of the public. But an anonymous copper, in a country often mocked for the poor quality of its public administration, had made it his business to track us down and solve our problems. Our police, once the envy of the world, have given up.