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Without a Trace

A drugstore robbery leaves a huge mess—and a lot of questions.

Bob Moranes got a terrible surprise when he arrived at work one Saturday morning.

Moranes was the owner of Gooch Pharmacy near Chattanooga, Tennessee. On the morning of October 15, 2005, he unlocked the store, as usual.

But when he walked into his drugstore, his heart jumped. The pharmacy was a mess. The shelves had

been swept clean. Empty boxes and medicine bottles littered the floor. The cash register had been forced open, and all the money was gone. A lot of drugs were missing, too.

Moranes picked up the phone and called the police.

Not long after, the police fingerprint team arrived at the drugstore. These specialists prepared to process the scene and find any fingerprints that the burglar had left behind.

Missing Prints

Burglars often leave fingerprints all over a crime scene. Everyone's fingerprints are unique. No two people share the same pattern of fingerprints. That makes them great evidence for identifying people.

The fingerprint specialists dusted the cash register. But all the prints belonged to people who worked at the store.

They dusted all the empty medicine boxes and bottles that were out of place. No new prints.

How had the burglar made such a mess of the pharmacy without leaving any prints?



FINGERPRINT SPECIALISTS dust surfaces with fingerprint powder to make invisible prints visible.

Don't Forget to Dust

Here's what fingerprint specialists do at the crime scene.

1. Wait for the photographer.

Before anyone else touches the crime scene, a police photographer takes pictures. That way, there's a record of what the scene looked like before the investigation began.

2. Check out the crime scene.

Fingerprint specialists look for prints on anything the perp (short for "perpetrator") might have touched, like doors, walls, counters, and furniture.

3. Dust for prints.

The specialists brush these surfaces with powder that sticks to the oil and sweat in fingerprints. This makes the prints more visible.

4. Document the evidence.

Specialists use something sticky, like tape, to capture a print. Then they stick the tape to a card. They note the date and place where the print was found. They may also photograph the print and scan it into a computer.

5. Gather other evidence.

Are there any weapons or tools at the scene? Specialists take them back to the lab and check them for prints, too.

6. Find a match.

If there's a suspect, specialists will compare the prints from the crime scene to the suspect's. If there's not a suspect, specialists can run the prints through IAFIS, a computer database that stores millions of prints.



Dusting for prints



Fingerprints are lifted onto tape, then taped to a print card.



Examining a perpetrator's prints