Case #2: The Golden Toilet Heist

World famous heistologist Atlas Salta sat at the kitchen table finishing a plate of French fries. His mother sat across from him with a chemistry textbook open in front of her, turned to a page with the periodic table of elements.



“A-U?” his mother asked.

“Gold,” Atlas replied with confidence.

His mother was quizzing him for an upcoming chemistry test, and he had nearly memorized the entire periodic table. Because many of the symbols were completely different than the name of the element, it was kind of like a puzzle. And he loved puzzles.

In the next room, he could hear his father working on their leaky toilet. His father was a nuclear engineer who had built Atlas a device to transport him anywhere in the world in seconds. But his father was regularly befuddled by more basic things like household plumbing.

From the bathroom, Atlas heard a sudden gush of water. Then all the lights in their house went out.

“Um, could someone please flip the breaker switch?” his father’s voice came out of the dark.

It wasn’t the first time something like this had happened. So Atlas knew exactly where their house’s electrical panel was.

“I’m on it,” he said as he stood and headed for the basement.

He could see in the dark better than his parents, so this was usually his job. He’d looked that up too and learned that people with lighter eyes—like blue or gray—had better night vision. His eyes were blue, while his parents’ eyes were brown.

At the bottom of the stairs, he flipped a switch on the wall. All the lights in the house turned on again.

“Our hero!” his mom cheered.

Just then the red magnifying glass started flashing across the screen of his smart watch. He tapped the screen.

“Atlas Salta,” he said as he climbed the stairs back to the first floor. “Heists handled hastily.”

“It’s Kerfuffle,” came the inspector’s familiar voice over the watch. “I’m at a palace in England where a rather unique sort of throne has been stolen. Can you help?”

“Of course,” Atlas said. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Another case?” his mom asked when he arrived in the kitchen.

“Is it okay if I go?”

His mother nodded. “Sure, I’ll just finish testing you when you get back.

In the backyard, Atlas climbed the rope ladder to his treehouse. He headed for the keypad beside the slide and punched in the coordinates, then sat in the slide and pushed off. A few moments later, he was standing in front of a sweeping palace made of brown stone. Police cars with flashing blue lights filled the large courtyard. Inspector Kerfuffle in his black trenchcoat waved to him from the top of the palace steps.

“Welcome to Blenheim Palace” Kerfuffle said as he led the way inside. “Watch your step. The thief left a bit of a mess.”

Atlas noticed water all over the floor as they walked through the building’s sweeping entrance foyer. At another doorway, they turned right into a hall where a small crowd of people was gathered around a door at the end. A sign over the door read, “Loo,” which Atlas knew was the British word for bathroom.

“Are all these people with the police?” Atlas asked.

“No, just a bunch of, ah, lookie-loos, you might say” Officer Kerfuffle said with a snicker. “But I’ve had my men clear the main site of the crime.”

He ushered Atlas into the room at the end. Atlas noted that the room’s door was hanging off its hinges at an odd angle. Inside was a small room not much bigger than a closet. It had brown wood paneling and more water puddled all over the floor. The water seemed to be sparkling in the low light.

Atlas arched his eyebrows when he noted the toilet paper holder on one wall of the otherwise empty room. “The item stolen was a…toilet?”

“Indeed,” Kerfuffle said. “But not just any toilet. This one was made from 18 karat solid gold and was worth approximately six million dollars. It was part of an art installation by the famous artist Mercurio Marzipan. He called it ‘Ameri*go*,’ a rather clever pun, I’d say, inspired by the explorer who is the namesake for North and South America.”

“Amerigo Vespucci, you mean,” Atlas said, nodding. “And it was an actual working toilet?”

“That’s right. Exhibit visitors could book a private 3-minute, er, viewing slot. At least, until the thief broke in this morning just before five a.m. Whoever it was smashed the pipes and dragged it out through the front door before speeding off with Marzipan’s work.”

“I see,” Atlas said. “What do we have to go on?”

Inspector Kerfuffle snort-laughed. “Nothing at the moment! Good one, Mr. Salta.”

Atlas turned to him quizzically.

“Oh, I suppose you probably meant evidence,” Kerfuffle said. “Right. Sorry. Here are our suspects.” And he handed Atlas a sheet of paper.

THE SUSPECT LIST

- **Ellie Mental**: She’s a student at nearby Rockport University majoring in chemistry. When not cooking up chemical concoctions to change her hair color, she enjoys climbing trees and dreaming up epic pranks with her sorority sisters.

  (5’4” * Right-handed * Brown eyes * Green hair (currently))

- **Little John**: He runs a tourist trap called The Loo-vre, which is semi-famous for housing England’s second largest collection of toilets, after the National Poo Museum. If that’s the kind of thing you want to be famous for.

  (5’2” * Right-handed * Brown eyes * Gray hair)

- **Charlie Main**: A former sports star turned reluctant director of the palace from which the golden toilet was stolen. He has vowed not to take this outrageous theft sitting down.

  (6’1” * Left-handed * Brown eyes * Blond hair)

- **Mercurio "Merc" Marzipan**: He's the Italian artist behind Amerigo. His prior history shows he's not above yanking the public's chain with a publicity stunt like this.

  (6'2" * Right-handed * Blue eyes * Black hair)

- **Groupie Jill**: She's the founder and president of the M&M's, a club of Marzipan's superfans. Consisting of just herself, her mother, and her cat.

  (5'4" * Right-handed * Brown eyes * Brown hair)

"An interesting list of suspects," Atlas said. "We'll definitely need M.O.M. to help with this one."

Officer Kerfuffle blinked at him, then a lightbulb went on in his eyes. "Ah, now I remember. Means, Opportunity and….what was the last one again?"

"Motive," Atlas helped out.

"Motive. Of course. That's why we leave the detecting to you."

WHO HAD THE MEANS?

"Let's start with Means like last time," Atlas said. "Based on your investigation so far, what might have been needed to steal the golden toilet?"

Officer Kerfuffle flipped open his notepad and showed Atlas the following list. "Here's what we have."

- Sledgehammer: For when you want to uninstall a toilet, but don't have time to read the instructions.
- Excellent night vision: Handy for wandering dark buildings at night. They say it's enhanced by a healthy diet of karats. Or is it carrots?
- Fast getaway car: Just try running from the police while hefting a 200-pound toilet. No, you'd definitely want some wheels for that.
- Blowtorch: Because you can't exactly put your stolen golden toilet on eBay. You'll need to melt it down first into stuff like wedding rings and edible gold dust.

Officer Kerfuffle also provided the following clues that he and his team had collected:

CLUES:

- A recent social media post from The Loo-vre shows employees demoing a wall to make room for a new exhibit on the commodes of British kings and queens to be called “A Royal Flush.”
- Due to a shortage of Bunsen burners at the local university, many students have opted to use blowtorches instead. What could possibly go wrong?
- A search of the palace director’s desk turned up a whopping 256 speeding tickets, which he claims are all a “misunderstanding.”

	ELLIE	JOHN	CHARLIE	MERC	JILL
SLEDGE-HAMMER					
NIGHT VISION					
GETAWAY CAR					
BLOW-TORCH					
RESULT					

WHO HAD THE OPPORTUNITY?

“I still can’t believe he was able to build an entire working toilet with just eighteen carrots,” Jill commented when Officer Kerfuffle told her she was free to go. “Maybe he’ll use orange ones next time.”

“Umm…” the officer said, raising his index finger as she exited the interrogation room.

“She’ll figure it out eventually,” Atlas said. “But I think it’s clear we released the correct suspect.”

“Indeed. Well, I believe that leaves us at Opportunity?”

Atlas nodded. “Do we have anything that proves the remaining suspects were in the area this morning to commit the crime?”

Kerfuffle quickly flipped through his notebook and provided the following evidence:

CLUES:

- Patrons at the pub just down the road from Blenheim say they were subjected to several hours of sea shanties sung by the legendary footballer nicknamed the “Goalie Roman Emperor.” He claims he was tucked in bed all night.
- A security camera mounted at the entrance to the palace grounds was knocked offline when a truck smashed through the front gates. In the moment before the camera went offline, it managed to capture the license plate: TOODLOO.
- A taxi driver reported dropping off a mysterious passenger in front of the palace earlier that morning. Whoever it was had their face obscured by a hoodie but left several blue hairs behind in the back seat.

	ELLIE	JOHN	CHARLIE	MERC
PUB PATRONS				
SECURITY CAMERA				
TAXI DRIVER				
RESULT				

WHO HAD THE RIGHT MOTIVE TO STEAL THE TOILET?

"One of my officers just radioed in to say that she found Mercurio at his apartment, duct taped to his wall," Inspector Kerfuffle said. "Apparently he was practicing for an upcoming performance art show but had forgotten to ask someone to get him down."

"So he couldn't have been here for the heist," Atlas said. "Which means we have three suspects remaining."

"Let's look at the motives and see if we can *flush* out our culprit," Kerfuffle said with a chuckle.

Atlas glanced at him, then continued, "Based on the type of crime, what would you say are the likely motives?"

After consulting with his officers, Inspector Kerfuffle made the following suggestions:

Money: It's hard to rule out with a haul this big. Plus, you'll need some cash to accessorize with a golden plunger, golden toilet paper, golden…hmmm, maybe it would've been cheaper to buy a regular old toilet?

Fun and Games: For some people it's Monopoly. But if stealing golden toilets is your idea of a good time, then you do you. As long as you know there's no get out of jail free card included.

Fame: Sure, you could achieve it by working really hard for years and years while waiting for your lucky break. Or you could, you know, just swipe a golden toilet.

CLUES:

A newspaper article headline reads: "Loo-vre Files for Bankruptcy; Business in Toilet."

A photo surfaced on an anonymous social media account with a photo of the golden toilet. Above it was a sign where "Amerigo" was crossed out and replaced with the Greek letter Tau.

"Another clever name," Kerfuffle commented when he showed Atlas the post.

"Maybe a little too clever," Atlas said. "Because now I have a pretty good idea who pulled off the heist. And I'd guess they did it just for laughs."

	ELLIE	JOHN	CHARLIE
MONEY			
FUN & GAMES			
FAME			

WRAPPING UP THE CASE

When the police raided the Alpha Tau sorority house at Rockport University, they followed the sound of water flushing to an upstairs bathroom. Atlas and Inspector Kerfuffle stood outside as Ellie Mental emerged running a brush through her green hair. The missing golden toilet was installed in the bathroom right behind her.

Ellie paused mid-brush and grinned. “You figured it out faster than I expected.”

“Yes, well, thanks to M.O.M.,” Kerfuffle said.

Ellie frowned and looked past them. “Aww, I knew I shouldn’t have let my mother in on the secret.”

“Actually, it was the name in your post on social media that gave you away,” Atlas explained. “After all, who else but a chemistry major would name a golden toilet using ‘Au,’ the chemical symbol for gold?”

“Oh, I get it,” Inspector Kerfuffle said, his eyes lighting up. “Toilet plus Au equals Tau.” Then he frowned. “But our clues didn’t place her at the scene of the crime that night.”

“Actually, the blue hairs in the taxi were hers,” Atlas said.

Kerfuffle looked at the green-haired Ellie, then back at Atlas.

“When I noticed the water on the bathroom floor at Blenheim sparkling, I guessed that the thief’s first attempt to remove the toilet was to try to saw through the pipes. Which produced a lot of gold dust.”

“He’s right,” Ellie said. “I’ve been trying to get it out of my hair ever since. The yellow dust combined with my blue hair have made my head look like a giant pickle.”

“But then, how did you break into the palace in the first place?” the inspector asked.

“I was wondering about that myself when the taxi dropped me off,” Ellie said. “But not long after I arrived, a pickup truck smashed through the gates with its bed full of construction equipment. I’d only been planning on spray painting a new name over the toilet, but the timing of the truck’s arrival seemed like a sign that I should liberate Tau instead.”

“And the driver of the truck?” Kerfuffle asked.

“Was Little John,” Atlas answered him. “My guess is he offered to give Charlie a ride home from the local pub where they’d been singing sea shanties all night. But neither of them was in particularly good condition for driving.”

“Maybe you should hire this kid to do the detective work,” Ellie said to Inspector Kerfuffle. “He’s exactly right. I helped Charlie to his apartment here in the palace, and John decided to walk home. Then I got to work freeing the golden toilet. I guess I’m in big trouble, huh?”

“Actually,” Kerfuffle said. “Mercurio Marzipan is so pleased with all the publicity that your little stunt gave him that he’s decided not to press charges. He even asked me to say thank you.”

“Um, he’s welcome, I guess?” Ellie said.

“Now that we’ve solved the case,” Atlas said, “I should get back to studying for my chemistry test.”

“Ooh, I hope the test goes oxygen potassium,” Ellie said, winking at him.

Atlas furrowed his brow, then grinned at her. “OK!” When Kerfuffle looked confused, he explained. “Those are the chemical symbols for oxygen and potassium: O-K.”

“It’s a little chemistry joke,” Ellie said and smiled. “I figured you’d get it.”

“Yes, well,” Inspector Kerfuffle said, still looking a little lost, “we’ll have the toilet returned to Blenheim. And maybe have a guard stationed outside to prevent other thieves from getting any ideas. Thank you so much again for your help.”

“Any time,” Atlas said. He pressed the button on his watch labeled “Home.” The view of the golden toilet dissolved in front of him, and moments later he found himself sitting at the end of his treehouse slide. He walked across the yard to his back door.

His mother looked up from where she was reading at the table when he walked in. “Welcome home, son. The plumber just left, so you’ll be happy to hear the toilet is working again. How did the case go?”

Atlas thought for a minute. “OK,” he said, and smiled.

THE REAL-LIFE HEIST BEHIND THE HEISTOGRAM

The Golden Toilet Heist
Where: Oxfordshire, England
When: September 14, 2019

The golden toilet featured in this heistogram is based on a real toilet made of 18-karat solid gold. Its artist, Italian Maurizio Cattelan, has a reputation as a jokester whose other works include a banana duct taped to a wall which sold for over $6 million. He imagined the golden toilet, which he named *America*, as a piece of participatory art that viewers could physically interact with. Which explains why its first installation at the famous Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City was not in one of the museum's galleries but in a public restroom where more than 100,000 art fans lined up to, er, "interact" with the sculpture.

In 2019, *America* was loaned to Blenheim Palace in England, the childhood birthplace of Winston Churchill, who was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during World War Two. The toilet was there less than two days. The only real security protecting the palace's new throne was a standard lock on the door to the small bathroom where it was installed. Authorities at Blenheim assumed the fact of its being plumbed into the wall as a real working toilet should deter would-be thieves. So they were bowled over, so to speak, when just before five a.m. on September 14, a truck rammed through the palace's gates. Five masked thieves piled out of the truck and another car, smashed the golden toilet out of the wall with a sledgehammer, dragged it through Blenheim's front doors, and escaped into the night in under six minutes.

Police were left with little more than a burst pipe and a flooded floor to puzzle out who had committed the crime. Initially, the artist himself was considered a suspect in light of his previous pranks, including stealing another artist's entire collection from an art gallery and passing it off as his own. To make matters worse, fake golden toilets began appearing all over the country when shop owners began spray painting regular commodes with gold paint to capitalize on the popularity of the crime. The National Poo Museum, an actual museum at the time on the United Kingdom's Isle of Wight, naturally loo-ved the extra publicity.

Artist Cattelan, too, was thrilled by the additional attention that the theft brought him and his work. "I always liked heist movies, and finally I'm in one of them," he commented when asked for his take. And after all, he'd originally made three of the golden toilets, one of which later sold to museum *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* for $12.1 million. As of this writing,

Ripley's was working on plans to display its latest acquisition for visitors to experience themselves.

Eventually, three men were arrested and sentenced to prison in 2025: James Sheen, a career criminal who was pegged as the plot's mastermind; Michael Jones, whose photo gallery from his cell phone included a selfie with the golden toilet from the day before the heist; and Frederick Doe, who helped sell the gold. The other thieves have yet to be found. As does the golden toilet itself. Authorities suspect that *America* was broken up or melted down to be sold in pieces. So think about it: next time you see a gold necklace or ring, there just might be a little bit of toilet in that jewelry.

ANSWERS:

MEANS

Sue	Gus	Stan	Ron	Jane	
x	x	✓	x	x	Really big pump
x	x	x	✓	x	Truck
x	✓	x	x	x	Barrel opener
x	x	x	x	✓	Key
x	✓	✓	✓	✓	Result

OPPORTUNITY

Gus	Stan	Ron	Jane	
✓	x	x	x	Eyewitness
x	x	x	✓	Security footage
x	✓	x	x	Traffic camera
✓	✓	x	✓	Result

MOTIVE

Gus	Stan	Jane	
x	✓	x	Money
✓	x	x	Revenge
x	x	✓	Love