Case #3: The Bridge Heist

Atlas Salta tipped the small box forward and let the popsicle sticks inside spill out onto his desk. Then he leaned back in his chair and studied the thin, wooden sticks. The assignment was to build the strongest bridge possible with just these sticks and some glue. All around him, his classmates were busily gluing and building as bridges of all shapes took form on their desks.

“Aren’t you going to build anything?” Brandon asked in the seat next to him. In only ten minutes of building time, Brandon’s bridge already stretched most of the way across his desk.

“I will,” Atlas said. “I guess I need to think about it first.”

To Atlas, this assignment was like any other puzzle. And he loved puzzles. He knew that if he gave his brain enough time to chew on the problem first, he’d come up with a solution.

“Well, you can share mine if you want,” Brandon said. He carefully slid his bridge over the gap between their two desks. It was just long enough to reach across. “It’s definitely going to win for strongest bridge. See, the sides are squares so that they’ll support even more…”

Brandon trailed off and wiggled his nose. “Support even more…AH-CHOO!” He sneezed right at his bridge. The bridge collapsed, scattering popsicle sticks all over the floor.

“Hmm,” he said. “On second thought, I may need to work on my design a little more.”

As Atlas helped him collect the pieces off the floor, he noticed a section that Brandon had accidentally glued together into a triangle. It hadn’t broken apart like the rest. Before he could think about that, though, the red magnifying glass started blinking on the screen of his smartwatch.

“Atlas Salta,” he said into his watch. “Heists handled hastily.”

“It’s Kerfuffle,” came the Inspector Kerfuffle’s voice through the watch. “I’m in Russia today at the scene of a rather perplexing heist. You’ll have to see it to believe it. Er, not see it, that is? In any case, we need your help.”

“I’m in class right now, but I can be there in about ten minutes,” Atlas said.

“Perfectly fine,” the inspector said. “It’s not going anywhere. Or, rather, it already went somewhere. That’s the problem.” Kerfuffle chuckled to himself.

Atlas raised his hand to get his teacher’s attention.

“Another case, Atlas?” Mrs. Goldsberry said, her eyes lighting up. Everyone at his school knew Atlas was a world-famous heistologist. In fact, his teachers were some of his biggest fans. They were always happy to excuse him from class when a new case came in.

“That’s right,” Atlas said. “Would it be okay if I finished my bridge tonight for homework?”

“Absolutely,” she said with a wink. “As long as you tell me all about it when you get back.”

Ten minutes later, Atlas walked up his driveway and around to the back of his house. Fortunately, he lived close to school. That way he could respond to heist calls on short notice whenever they came in.

When he climbed into his treehouse, he punched in the coordinates from Inspector Kerfuffle. Then he ducked into the tube slide and pushed off. There was a flash of blue light. Moments later, he stood on a low cliff overlooking a river.

“Mr. Salta!” he heard someone call. Atlas turned to see Inspector Kerfuffle walking toward him in his bright yellow trenchcoat. Atlas shivered a little, wishing he’d brought a coat. It had been a warm spring day back home, but it was much chillier here.

“Welcome to Murmansk, Russia,” the inspector greeted him. “I’m hoping to solve this one before the trail goes cold.” He paused and chuckled to himself. “Which may be harder than usual since we’re above the Arctic Circle.”

“What was stolen exactly?” Atlas asked, getting right down to business.

Kerfuffle swept his arm toward the river. “Right, well, there you have it.”

Atlas studied the river more closely. On both sides stood small crowds of people looking down into the water about fifty feet below, then all around as if they were searching for something. Then he noticed that the road on his side seemed to stop abruptly at the edge of the cliff. His eyes widened.

“Wait, you mean…the entire bridge was stolen?”

Inspector Kerfuffle grimaced. “Exactly. It used to join East Murmansk to West Murmansk. Residents claim it was there yesterday. But when they woke up today, it was gone. The thief must have used the cover of the big storm last night to steal away while everyone was indoors. Each side blames the other for its disappearance.” He removed a diagram from the briefcase he was holding. “Here is what it looked like.”



Atlas furrowed his eyebrows. “Let me guess, the two sides of the town couldn’t decide on a design for the bridge?”

“Exactly right,” the inspector said. “So they each built their own side and joined them in the middle. The final bridge was twenty-four meters long and weighed over fifty tons.”

“That’s a pretty big bridge,” Atlas said. He studied the gap over the river. He knew this case was going to be a tough one. After all, how did someone steal an entire bridge? And where would they put it? But he knew that, like always, applying logic to the case would result in a solution.

He turned back to Inspector Kerfuffle. “Do you have a list of suspects?”

“We’ve narrowed it down to these five people,” the inspector said and handed him a piece of paper.

THE SUSPECT LIST

- **Presto Change-o:** He’s the son of the town baker but dreams of becoming a magician instead. He claims the disappearing bridge is his latest trick. It would also be…his only trick that’s ever actually worked.
  (5’11” * Right-handed * Blue eyes * Black hair)
- **Captain Boris**: He runs Norse invasion tours along the river promising the “authentic Viking experience” in his replica dragon warship. For years he’s complained about the fact that the towns built the bridge too low.
  (6’7” * Left-handed * Green eyes * Blond hair)
- **Ivanka West**: Somewhat ironically, she’s the mayor of East Murmansk. Her constituents say she spends more time shopping to add to her collection of high heels than running the town.
  (5’7” * Left-handed * Brown eyes * Brown hair)
- **Dmitry Cherezzabornoguzaderishchenko**: He’s the mayor of West Murmansk. His constituents recently passed a resolution to legally change his last name to something they can pronounce.
  (5’10” * Right-handed * Blue eyes * Blond hair)
- **Ana Stasia**: She’s the local ne-e’r-do-well and rabble rouser. Typically whenever something bad happens, she probably had something to do with it.
  (5’1” * Right-handed * Brown eyes * Red hair)

Atlas frowned at the photos on the suspect list. “How old is this last person?”

“Oh, she’s only twelve,” Kerfuffle said. “But don’t let that fool you. I’m told her school already has a file on her thicker than an *oladi*.”

Atlas glanced at the inspector.

“Oh, sorry. That’s a Russian pancake. I was starving so I had some right before you arrived. Trust me, they’re thick. Anyway, the principal of Ana’s school recently reported his SUV stolen. He suspects she had something to do with it.”

WHO HAD THE MEANS?

“Well, it’s an interesting list,” Atlas said. “But I know M.O.M. can help us narrow it down. As usual, let’s start with Means. What tools or resources would the thief have needed to steal an entire bridge?”

After consulting with his detectives, Inspector Kerfuffle provided the following list:

- Saw: To make sure no one would spot them carry off the bridge, the thief probably had to saw it into smaller pieces. Then no one would see what they sawed. See?
- Transport: Even if it’s in pieces, it’s…still an entire bridge. So the thief would have needed something to haul it away.
- Construction crane: The bridge weighed about 50 tons. It’s common knowledge that a ton is about the weight of 31,000 bananas. And you’d definitely want a crane to move all those bananas. That, or a ton of monkeys.
- Magic: As unlikely as it may seem, we’re not ruling it out just yet. After all, stealing a whole bridge in one night seems pretty unlikely too.

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

CLUES:

- Just saying, if you wanted to haul away a bridge, a boat wouldn’t be a bad way to do it.
- East Murmansk recently leased construction equipment to replace the dome on its capitol building with a new golden one to make it shinier than West Murmansk’s bronze dome.
- The suspect with the longest name would never use the tool with the shortest name on Kerfuffle’s list.

	PRESTO	BORIS	IVANKA	DMITRY	ANA
SAW					
TRANS-PORT					
CRANE					
MAGIC					
RESULT					

WHO HAD THE OPPORTUNITY?

“It doesn’t appear that Dmitry Cherezz…um, that is, the mayor of West Murmansk is behind the bridge’s disappearance,” Kerfuffle said.

“He doesn’t have the brain power to pull off something like this,” Ivanka chimed in, overhearing their conversation.

“You could figure out a dozen ways to steal a bridge without breaking a sweat,” Captain Boris told her. “You’ve got both beauty and brains.”

Ivanka blushed, then her eyes widened. “Not that I…you know…had anything to do with this. Wait, is that someone calling me?” She scurried away into the crowd of onlookers calling out, “I’m coming!”

“Her behavior certainly seemed a little suspicious,” Inspector Kerfuffle said. “I wonder if we should move her to the top of our suspect list.”

“M.O.M. will tell us for sure,” Atlas said.

The inspector looked around expectantly, then his cheeks reddened. “Oh right, you mean *that* M.O.M.” He flipped through his notebook. “I believe we’re at Opportunity, correct?”

“That’s right,” Atlas said. “What do we know about each suspect’s movements last night?”

Kerfuffle found the page he was looking for and turned it toward Atlas.

CLUES

- When the river had receded after the storm, the local school principal’s SUV was found stuck nose down in the mud of the riverbank.
- An old woman who lives near the bridge claims she looked out her window around midnight and, in a flash of lightning, witnessed the golden-haired god Thor himself soaring over the river.
- The trail of odd indentations below was found leading up to the river.



	PRESTO	BORIS	IVANKA	ANA
CAR				
ODD TRAIL				
OLD WOMAN				
RESULT				

WHO HAD THE MOTIVE TO STEAL THE BRIDGE?

“Does that mean I didn’t do it?” Presto asked, looking over their shoulders.

“It does look that way,” Inspector Kerfuffle confirmed.

“Phew! I’m so relieved,” Presto said. “See, I was home practicing my act last night on a cookie, and right after I said the magic words, there was a huge boom. I thought maybe I missed and made the bridge disappear instead. But I guess it was just plain old thunder.”

“Did the cookie disappear?” Atlas asked.

“Oh absolutely,” Presto said, then looked down at his shoes. “But only because I ate it.”

“Well, it appears that this time we have a regular, non-magical thief,” Atlas said.

“I guess you’re free to go,” Kerfuffle said.

“Fabulous,” Presto said. “I have a ticket for the next Viking invasion tour in an hour and don’t want to miss it.”

“Then I hope you can magic up some repairs for my ship,” Captain Boris said. “She’s laid up for at least a week with a bent mast from last night’s storm.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know any tricks for that,” Presto said. “But I do have a hammer you can borrow.”

Atlas turned to the inspector. “Now that we’ve narrowed down the suspect list to three people, let’s look at their motives to help us identify the culprit.”

Kerfuffle nodded. “Here’s what we’ve come up with so far as possible motives:

- Jealousy: It’s made people do a lot of questionable deeds, but is this deed a bridge too far?

- Shenanigans: We all know a person who does things just for the sake of causing a little harmless mischief. And if you don’t, then maybe it’s you.

- Accident: Hey, everyone mistakes sometimes. Just…not usually the “Oops, I stole a 50-ton bridge” kind of mistake.

“Those are excellent suggestions,” Atlas said. “Based on everything I’ve seen so far, I believe the last motive is the most likely.”

CLUES:

- East Murmansk has come in second to West Murmansk three years in a row for the regional “Best Bridge Half” award.
- It’s no accident that the nickname for one of the remaining suspects comes from their most likely motive for swiping the bridge.

	BORIS	IVANKA	ANA
JEALOUSY			
SHEN-ANIGANS			
ACCIDENT			

WRAPPING UP THE CASE

“Wait, you’re saying *I* stole the bridge?” Captain Boris exclaimed. “That’s preposterous!”

“You didn’t exactly steal it,” Atlas explained. “And I don’t think you meant to.”

“So…should we arrest him?” Inspector Kerfuffle asked. “Or…?”

Atlas shook his head. “You see, Captain Boris’s ship barely fit under the bridge in normal weather. So when the rain from last night’s storm made the river swell, the ship no longer fit under. It wasn’t the wind that bent his mast. It was the collision with the bridge, which he didn’t hear due to a well-timed burst of thunder.” He paused and looked at Ivanka. “And also because I think he was a little distracted.”

Ivanka blushed. “I admit, I couldn’t resist a private excursion with my Viking warrior. He picked me up at the river’s edge and we stood together at the helm of the ship while the rain pelted our faces. It was so romantic.”

Ana raised an eyebrow. “Why didn’t you just go see a movie?”

“Hey, are those my SUV keys dangling from your backpack?” the school principal asked.

“Um, gotta go,” Ana said and scurried away.

Inspector Kerfuffle looked at the river and frowned, then looked back at Atlas. “Then what happened to the bridge?”

“It was already an accident waiting to happen,” Atlas explained. He used a stick to draw the bridge in the mud of the riverbank.



“The shapes that the two halves of the town used to build it aren’t strong enough to support much weight. So when the principal’s stolen SUV was parked in the middle of the bridge, it was already under a lot of strain. The blow from the ship’s mast was all it took to make it collapse. You’ll likely find the pieces of the bridge somewhere farther down the river.”

“So what you’re saying…” Inspector Kerfuffle said slowly, “is that basically everyone involved is responsible for the bridge’s disappearance?”

“That’s right. Except maybe Presto.” He glanced at the magician. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Presto said. “My chocolate chip cookies are way better than my magic tricks anyway. Maybe I should stay at my dad’s bakery after all.”

“You might say you’re a *chip* off the old block,” Kerfuffle said with a chuckle. He glanced around and turned red when no one laughed.

“If we’re all done here,” Atlas said. “I have a project to finish for homework tonight.”

“Indeed,” the inspector said. “Thanks again for your help. There’s no way we would have ever figured this out without you.”

Atlas tapped the “Home” button on his watch and the Russian town blinked out of sight.

The next day, he carefully lowered another one-ounce block onto his bridge. All around him, his classmates and teacher watched with anticipation. If the bridge held, Atlas would win the competition for strongest bridge. His experience in Russia had helped him discover that triangular bridge supports were the best because they distributed weight evenly across the structure.

Atlas gently placed the block, holding his breath. Then he slowly moved his hand away. The bridge didn’t budge!

All of his classmates cheered as Atlas breathed out a sigh of relief. Another puzzle solved by the world’s leading heistologist.

THE REAL-LIFE HEIST BEHIND THE HEISTOGRAM

The Bridge Heist(s)
Where: Russia, India, US, etc., etc.
When: Last 20 years

As unbelievable as it may seem, this heistogram is based on not one but many bridge heists from all over the world. Surprisingly, it's not all that unusual for bridges to be stolen, typically by scavenger crews who turn around and sell the scrap metal. And it's not just bridges, but other things like radio towers, an unexploded Soviet missile (which detonated at the recycling center it was sold to—oops) and anything made of metal that thieves think has value and they can get away with swiping.

I borrowed the location for this particular heistogram from a 2019 incident in Russia's Murmansk region above the Arctic Circle. Although the towns of East and West Murmansk and their squabble over the bridge are fictional, the bridge itself was really stolen, probably by first knocking it down then taking it apart piece by piece over several days. But because it was an abandoned railway bridge in a remote area, the heist was carried off with no witnesses, and it was more than a week before anyone noticed it was missing. The kicker was…it wasn't even all that valuable. Authorities speculate that the total haul for the 56-ton bridge was around 600,000 rubles, which may sound like a lot but translates to only about $9,000. And as the culprits were to learn, "no one else was using it" doesn't hold up as an argument in court.

Other notable bridge heists include:

- Russia's Khabarovsk Region (2008): Thieves made off with a 200-ton bridge overnight. Since the bridge was the only access route for employees at the local heating plant, the disappearance was discovered right away. The bridge was eventually rebuilt with concrete instead of metal.
- India's state of Bihar (2022): These cheeky heisters carried out their scheme in plain sight, posing as government officials as they arrived with forged papers and heavy equipment to dismantle the bridge over three days. Eventually someone smelled something fishy and eight individuals were arrested, including an actual government employee who facilitated the crime.
- Akron, Ohio (2021): A 63-year-old man was charged with stealing a 58-foot pedestrian bridge that had already been disassembled and was in storage at a local park. Police speculate that he planned to use it for a personal landscaping project.
- Los Angeles, California (2024): In what may be the record for the slowest heist ever, over the course of a year, thieves stole close to 7 miles of copper wire used to light

up L.A.'s 6th Street Bridge. Authorities remain in the dark, so to speak, about whodunnit, as well as the related theft of hundreds of fire hydrants across the city.

So, as you can see, bridge heists aren't actually all that unusual all around the world. Which means that, if someone tells you they've got a bridge to sell you, they might actually be telling the truth. Just don't forget to ask for a receipt!