

## Chapter 2

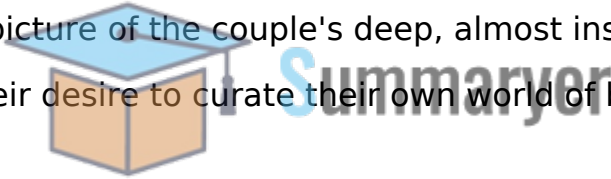
Chapter 2 begins with a humble home situated in Mulhouse, an industrial city in eastern France, where Stéphane Breitwieser and his girlfriend, Anne-Catherine Kleinklaus, lead their quiet yet peculiar lives. The house itself, constructed from pale, stuccoed concrete, resembles a cube, its small windows and steep, red-tiled roof blending into the surrounding suburban sprawl. Though it offers little in terms of architectural splendor, this modest dwelling hides a world of astonishing treasures. Inside, most of their living space occupies the ground floor, but a narrow staircase leads up to a cramped, low-ceilinged attic room, which remains shrouded in mystery. This room, tucked under the rafters, is always kept locked and the shutters remain permanently closed, keeping the couple's precious collection hidden from the outside world.

In their bedroom, the centerpiece is a magnificent four-poster bed draped with luxurious gold velour curtains, flanked by plush red satin sheets and cushions that exude opulence. Upon waking, Breitwieser often admires a prized ivory carving of *Adam and Eve*, which he considers a symbol of both beauty and craftsmanship. Along with the ivory sculpture, Breitwieser treasures other figurines, including a depiction of the Roman goddess Diana and another of Catherine of Alexandria. Each piece is meticulously crafted, capturing intricate details that continue to astonish him, with their luminous glow infusing his mornings with a sense of awe.

On Breitwieser's bedside table, several other remarkable objects tell their own stories. These include a polished golden tobacco box commissioned by Napoleon himself, as well as a prismatic flower vase created by the famous French artisan Émile Gallé. The presence of these items, each with its own rich historical significance, transforms the nightstand into a miniature museum of sorts, a personal testament to the couple's fascination with history and art. Alongside these treasures, a lavish silver goblet and

an assortment of tobacco tins, bronzes, and porcelain figurines are carefully arranged, each object exuding a sense of grandeur and nostalgia.

Anne-Catherine's side of the bed is equally adorned with treasures. Her night table, along with a large armoire, desk, and dresser, overflows with an eclectic assortment of items, including silver platters, gilded tea sets, and unique weaponry. The second room in the house holds even more remarkable artifacts, such as a wooden altarpiece, a stained-glass window, and a variety of musical instruments. Each piece seems to tell a story, painting a picture of the couple's deep, almost insatiable thirst for art, history, and culture, and their desire to curate their own world of beauty.



Despite the chaos of overflowing treasures, the home is filled with a sense of warmth and wonder. The armchairs, windowsills, and closets are packed with wristwatches, tapestries, and medieval artifacts—each item adding to the rich tapestry of their lives. However, it is the couple's art collection that truly stands out. The walls of their home are adorned with stunning oil paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with masterpieces from renowned artists such as Lucas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer. The vibrant colors and intricate details of these works fill the small space, making it feel as though the room is alive with the energy of the past. These paintings do not merely decorate the walls; they become a part of the couple's daily existence, a constant reminder of their passion for preserving the past.

Art journalists have estimated the value of the couple's collection to be worth as much as two billion dollars, an astonishing figure that places their trove of art and antiques far beyond what most people could ever imagine. The house, modest on the outside, is home to a treasure chest of rare and priceless items. In the quiet solitude of their attic, Breitwieser and Anne-Catherine have cultivated a world filled with beauty, history, and culture—a world that exists far beyond the reaches of most people's comprehension. This collection, hidden in plain sight within an unremarkable suburban home, represents not only a personal passion but a monumental achievement in the realm of art and historical preservation.