

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 of *The Art Thief* offers a deeper exploration of the tension between Anne-Catherine and Breitwieser as they continue their art-stealing spree across Europe. By early 1997, the couple has been involved in art theft for nearly two years, consistently stealing pieces from museums over the weekends. While Breitwieser still sees their criminal relationship as a shared passion, Anne-Catherine becomes increasingly weary and begins longing for a break from their illicit lifestyle. She feels conflicted, trapped in a cycle of criminality that has consumed much of her life, yet her commitment to Breitwieser keeps her from abandoning him. The situation grows more intense when Anne-Catherine reads a chilling headline in the newspaper about a police raid on museums in Normandy. The raid shakes her, and she becomes overwhelmed by the consequences of their actions, prompting the couple to retreat back home in fear of getting caught.

For Breitwieser, Anne-Catherine's winter vacation becomes a strategic opportunity to continue their criminal operations undetected. Instead of halting their art thefts, he believes they can outsmart the authorities by moving their activities to different countries. His reasoning is that European law enforcement faces obstacles like language barriers and lack of information-sharing between nations, making it more difficult for them to track down criminals operating in multiple countries. With this in mind, the two decide to travel to Belgium for a weekend heist, as Breitwieser has never stolen art in that country. Their plan is to evaluate security measures and potentially expand their thefts further when Anne-Catherine has more free time in the future. This tactic, while dangerous, appears to offer a way for them to continue their lifestyle without facing immediate consequences.

Breitwieser's obsession with collecting stolen art becomes increasingly apparent as the attic in their home fills up with hundreds of priceless items. The stolen artworks have

come to define him, and his sense of self is tied directly to the pieces he has stolen over the years. Drawing on insights from psychoanalyst Werner Muensterberger, it becomes clear that Breitwieser's behavior reflects a broader psychological condition common among collectors. Collectors like him often feel disconnected from the world around them, and stealing becomes a way to establish a sense of control and identity. Art theft allows Breitwieser to escape his personal struggles, and in a way, the stolen pieces give him a sense of ownership and power that he lacks in other areas of his life. Expert Erin Thompson expands on this idea, noting that many art thieves become more attached to the stolen items than their legitimate owners, creating a justification for their illegal actions. As the collection grows, so does Breitwieser's obsession, reinforcing the destructive nature of his compulsive behavior.

Though Breitwieser has never been caught, he knows that his criminal success cannot last forever. Every stolen piece, every heist, comes with the looming threat of being discovered. The couple's drive to Brussels is deliberate, as they avoid major highways to reduce the risk of being detected. They journey through back roads, blending into the surroundings as they make their way toward their next target. Once in Brussels, they arrive at the Art & History Museum, which Breitwieser considers a smaller version of the Louvre. He is determined to steal from the museum, seeing it as the perfect opportunity to execute a theft without getting caught. With everything in place, Breitwieser feels confident, ready to pull off what he imagines will be the perfect heist. However, even as he prepares, he cannot shake the awareness that his increasingly reckless behavior could soon lead to a downfall, setting the stage for the events that follow.