How to Plan a Successful Art Heist:  
A College Student’s Contingency Loan Repayment Plan and Backup Career Explained  
By Samara Diab

As an English major and prospective law student attempting to conceptualize six-figure debt, my life has morphed into a deafening series of what if's, an overwhelming collection of worst-case scenarios. 

What if I can’t find a job after graduation? What if I drop out and am stuck with debt but no degree? What if I regret all the life choices I ever made and have to pay for them for the rest of my life? It would be nice to have a Plan B, one that could repay all my student loans and still leave me with a nest egg to jumpstart the next chapter of my life. Then I could stop worrying about money and actually enjoy my education.

So naturally, I began to research backup careers. The problem is that I am not yet jaded. I still walk through life with my eyes wide, smile wider, thinking I can do something great and leave my mark on the world. If I am going to have a backup career, my one requirement is that it be something great. Something fascinating and unique, intellectually stimulating and creative. Something serious, and purposeful and just a little bit sexy. My backup career should be the Mona Lisa of backup careers, a stunningly nuanced masterpiece with a smile that leaves you wanting more.

Or maybe instead of crafting a career in the image of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, I could just steal it.

One successful art heist and I would be set for life.

Maybe it is the desperation brought on by the thought of debt until death that makes me turn to crime. I could go on a long-winded, flowery monologue about a love of brushstrokes and blended hues or perhaps adopt a more Robin Hood-esque tone and rant for a bit about the need to redistribute the art world’s wealth, but those arguments would not be genuine. It is more a fascination with the intricacies of a well-planned heist paired with my commitment to financial
responsibility that has led me to this decision. Also, a paralyzing fear of drowning in student loan payments contributed its two cents.

When all is said and done, I consider myself an ethical person; however, I can easily rationalize my moral digression. Art theft is a victimless crime requiring precision, skill, and an eye for beauty. I am not just in it for the glory. One canvas coated in the aging, musings of artistic visionaries is accompanied by more zeros than my degrees. And these are American degrees earned in the throes of a student debt crisis. I would describe myself as practical and thus, if one career change, one entrepreneurial endeavor, can repay all of my loans, then I will happily forgo ten years of droning government work required by federal loan repayment plans. In a way, my perfectly planned heist is a metaphorical soapbox from which I will project the injustices of tuition bills. The world will listen if I hold its masterpieces hostage.

Moral arguments aside, I must admit that I am drawn to the glory as well.

In our culture, according Sophie Gilbert in *The Atlantic*, art is the “currency of power and prestige.” Art theft is a theft of culture, of history. It is the ownership of beauty. It is a crime of sophistication. It is attractive. It is seductive. Popular culture perceives art theft as the gentleman’s crime, carried out by ruggedly handsome, sharply intelligent millionaires. Inherently masculine stereotypes such as Danny Ocean and Thomas Crown demonstrate the sex appeal of these master thieves. I intend to infiltrate this boys club and, alongside Sandra Bullock, revolutionize the definition of art thief because what kind of a feminist would I be if my backup career did not involve breaking a glass ceiling or two?

So, after much consideration and some Googling, which I now realize has left incriminating evidence on my Internet search history, I have decided to commit myself to the career. The weekend before final exams, I could use a distraction, an engaging study break, a justification for procrastination; thus, I have begun formulating my plan.
The setting of an art museum is intriguing, adding to the appeal and challenge of planning an art heist. Museums represent the ultimate paradox, the intersection of accessibility and security, tempting thieves to transgress the boundaries, to blur the lines between experiencing and owning. With technological advancements, art museums have simultaneously enhanced security measures and provided the public with longer, closer, more personal access to the masterpieces. Aspiring art thieves can practically touch their targets, but security systems and fast response times prohibit premature attempts, however tempting. So, art heists increasingly require more planning, more details, more investigation, more analysis, more research, more dedication. In essence, more of everything an over-achieving, honors English student is good at. I have spent years reading and discussing literary theory about transgressing every type of boundary imaginable; now, I can apply theory to practice.

In addition to the intricacies of museum security, information I do not intend to share for obvious reasons, my diligent research has also revealed several archetypes of the art thief.

Dictators and the perpetrators of war crimes commit the most effective form of art thievery. The Nazis during World War II are a prime example. However, despite its efficacy, this form of theft can never be condoned as it is made possible through violence, destruction, and more than a little authoritarianism. My motives are ultimately for the greater good, with some self-serving undertones, and thus, I disregard completely the archetype of the “dictator.”

Now the “bad boy” thief archetype seems to have more to offer. These thieves employ force and threats of violence to achieve their means but remain unassociated with the systematic human rights violation of war and fascism. For example, in 2000, two gunmen blew up cars in the street in front of a Swedish museum in order to steal two Renoirs and a Rembrandt. Similarly, in 2004 two gunmen stole Edvard Munch’s The Scream but ended up damaging the painting in the process.
Regardless, the “bad boy” thief’s use of force allows for swift heists, getting in and out with the prize in a matter of moments. However, the glory does not last. Having been too flashy with their tactics, these thieves are too easily tracked down. So far, none have been successful, aside the Polish pirates who stole the Last Judgment in 1473, but that was in the days before 911 and security cameras.

There is also the “goody-two-shoes” art thief. This archetype bothers me as I cannot decipher a clear motive other than to prove a point. These thieves plan heists just to say they did it and to teach museums a lesson or two about security in the process. In 1994, Edvard Munch’s The Scream was stolen (for the first time) and then abandoned with a note advising the museum to improve their security. Ten years later, in 2004, a Van Gogh, a Picasso and a Gauguin were left in a public bathroom with a similar note. I become frustrated visualizing my university education ten times over sitting behind a leaking, rarely cleaned toilet. Not only do these “goody-two-shoes” thieves disrespect artistic masterpieces but they do so with such a righteousness that I cannot help but feel a strong aversion. By pointing out loopholes in security, they intentionally make my job more challenging. Also, no one likes a tattletale, especially if they are also a show-off.

At this point, thoroughly unimpressed with the results of my research, I nearly gave up. Then, I came across the archetype of the “thief that did their homework.” I am really good at doing homework, an expert in fact, as it is what I have been doing every waking moment for what feels like forever. Homework is second nature to me and thus I can conform to any archetype for which research, critical thinking, analysis, and good grammar prove integral. It is also a bonus that these types of thieves tend to be the most successful.

I will concede that the man in 1911 who walked into the Louvre and walked out unnoticed with the Mona Lisa under his coat was later apprehended. I will also admit the defeat of the two thieves in 2003 who dressed as tourists and stole the Madonna. However, this archetype knows
success as well. For example, in 1990, two thieves dressed as police officers were able to talk their way into a museum in Boston and steal thirteen works of art. More recently, in 2010, Parisian cat burglars skillfully (and most probably acrobatically or at the very least gracefully) stole a Picasso and a Matisse. The masterminds of both these heists as well as the paintings are still at large.

While the “thief that did their homework” may not have the flair of the “bad boy” thief or the righteousness of the “goody-two-shoes” thief, they have success, and in the realm of art heists and in the reality of student debt, success is what pays the bills.

While I am tempted to jump straight into the deep end and begin collecting blueprints of the Louvre, or Met, or National Gallery, my practical nature prohibits such recklessness. Starting small is always the best course of action. Most art thieves lack good business sense. They are seduced by the sophistication and acrobatics involved with infiltrating a maze of red laser beams. They are overly ambitious, overly confident in their abilities, as that combination of arrogance and sheer talent is what makes the life of an art thief seem so attractive. They set their sights on masterpieces that the entire world will miss. Blinded by estimated price tags, they overlook the basics of the art business and the black market.

Past heists demonstrate that success is more likely when the target piece is not dripping with international fame. So, picking a target that will fetch a substantial sum on the black market but is not too well-known that buyers are hesitant to purchase the stolen masterpiece proves integral to the planning process. Counter-intuitive at first, by avoiding beloved artistic works I can ensure an availability of buyers and a higher black-market price. I have learned from the mistakes of the less economics-minded of my fellow art thieves and have resolved to set my sights low. I am in the business of art thievery for the profits and so I turn away from big names. Instead, I look towards regional museums where security is less intricate and the masterpieces less well-known.
Now, I consider myself to be a relatively intelligent person. I know that after reading my comment about wide eyes and a wider smile, you were hoping I would be naïve enough to divulge my plan. Unfortunately for you, that is not the case. I prefer to have the element of surprise on my side.

As the tuition bills pile up and the subsidized loans become scarce, I will be doing my homework, reading about artists like Georgia O’Keefe whose paintings can sell for upwards of $30 million but whose museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico has large windows and is currently hiring security guards. I will be Googling Jackson Pollock’s brother Charles who also took up painting and Blanche Monet, stepdaughter of Claude, who copied haystacks. Somewhere in the realm of the lesser-known I will pick my target and take a stand against crippling student debt.

Currently in training for a robust backup career, which makes use of both my English degree and my legal education, not to mention my last-minute minor in economics, I would advise you to keep an ear out for the whispers of my future success. And, if you are in the market for an O’Keefe, Charles Pollock or Blanche Monet, please don’t be a stranger. Think of it as a scholarship. I always do my homework so you can count on me.