

**The First Two Pages: “Not a Day Goes By” by J.A. Hennrikus**  
From *Every Day a Little Death: Crime Fiction Inspired by  
the Songs of Stephen Sondheim*, edited by Josh Pachter (Level Best Books)

An Essay by J.A. Hennrikus

A story requires a gravitational pull of ideas before I start writing. Having chosen *Merrily We Roll Along* as “my” musical for *Every Day a Little Death: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Stephen Sondheim*, and the song “Not a Day Goes By” as the inspiration for my story, I thought I was all set. I’d worked in the performing arts for over thirty years, most of them in theater. If I haven’t seen every Sondheim show, it’s not for lack of trying. Discussions of Sondheim musicals have been a topic of conversation more than once. Surely I could figure out how to craft the song into a crime story.

The history of this particular musical is interesting. *Merrily We Roll Along* was one of Sondheim’s famous flops. The 1981 Broadway debut closed after 16 performances and 44 previews. There’s a great documentary, *Best Worst Thing That Ever Could Have Happened*, about this first production. Sondheim reworked the musical over the years, with more successful runs in 1994, 2000, and then the recent 2022/3 Broadway hit.

Sondheim’s flops. In some cases, shows didn’t “work” because he was ahead of his time, and it took a few years for the work to be appreciated. In other cases the new show was so unlike his most recent hit audiences couldn’t cope. *Merrily* comes

between *Sweeney Todd* and *Sunday in the Park with George* and is based on a play by Kaufman and Hart. As is often the case, a lighter tone may have been dismissed as less important. Or less worthy of the genius that is Stephen Sondheim. But there are other—

I digress. This essay is about my story in the anthology and the gravitational pull of the idea.

“Not a Day Goes By” is arguably one of the best known Sondheim songs. Renditions have graced many a concert or cabaret stage. The genius of the song is that it doesn’t require knowing the show; the pain of heartbreak transcends context. Because of copyright I can’t quote the song, so I encourage you to listen to a few versions, or go to YouTube and watch the amazing Bernadette Peters version.

A song that I love combined with a deep knowledge of theater. One would think that would be enough to come up with a short story. But one, dear reader, would be wrong. Short stories are not my forte. They usually end up such big ideas I start a new book. The issue was more compelling, though. I couldn’t find a hook into the story.

Then the gravity took over.

I’ve been researching art forgeries and cons for the past couple of years. In addition to documentaries and nonfiction, I’ve been reading fiction featuring thieves. Last spring, during the gravity period, I was listening to the Vicky Bliss series by the amazing Elizabeth Peters. Again. The series features an art historian (Vicky Bliss) who

falls in love with an art thief (who uses the alias Sir John Smythe). By the end of the series he says that he has been redeemed by love, and Vicky believes him.

But what if John didn't, or couldn't, go straight? What if he lied to her over and over? Could I imagine Vicky singing "Not A Day Goes By"? Wanting to take John back while at the same time damning him to her past? This "what if" provided the gravitational force for my story. I decided to set it in the art world, and to sprinkle in forgeries and cons.

That I didn't set the story in the theater surprised me—and surprised the editor. But fighting with the muse didn't make sense. Once I'd decided on the characters, I wrestled with the plot. Once again, I almost started another book with the idea. I forced myself to get rid of the (wonderful) crooked PI and to boil it down to a story that served the brief. A long playlist of different versions of the song kept me on track.

Stephen Sondheim loved mysteries. It has been said that Anthony Shaffer based Andrew Wyke, the ingenious, murderous plotter in his play *Sleuth*, on Sondheim. Sondheim co-wrote *The Last of Sheila*, a 1973 whodunnit. He co-wrote a murder mystery play, *Getting Away with Murder*, with George Furst. (Another Sondheim flop.) He also did a cameo in *Glass Onion*. He said in an interview (which I can't find) that a musical and a mystery have dramatic structures that don't work well together. He was probably right. But oh, how I wish he'd tried.

## The First Two Pages of “Not a Day Goes By”

My ex-husband turned when I opened the door to the cabin. He was sorting through paintings and looked at us, startled.

“It’s not what you think,” he said, straightening and raising his hands.

“With you, Charles,” said Franklin, stepping in beside me, “it never is.”

### *Six Weeks Earlier*

“Not a day goes by. Not a single effing day that he isn’t somehow still part of my life,” I said, wiping my eyes. We both stared at the small painting of two elderly men sitting side by side on a park bench.

“You haven’t seen him recently, have you?” Franklin asked, his blue eyes searching my face over the rim of his black readers. He usually looked like a mischievous elf, but not today.

“Not since that time he showed up at my doorstep quoting Keats,” I said. “What’s that look? You believe me, don’t you?”

“You’ve lied to me before, Mary, when it comes to Charles.”

My gut reaction was to deny it, but he was right. I’d lied to Franklin about my erstwhile ex-husband going straight. Almost as many times as I’d lied to myself.

Charming men have always been my kryptonite. And Charles Tremain was as charming as they came. When we first met, he told me he was an art collector who owned a gallery. Since I was an art historian who worked in museum acquisitions, I felt as though I’d finally met someone who not only shared my passions but understood how they consumed me. Charles was also handsome, intelligent, charming, straight, witty, and sexy as hell.

So I started calling him Charlie and let myself fall. Hard. Thing was, he didn’t tell me he “collected” art by *stealing* it or switching it out for forgeries—or that his “gallery” was a huge fencing operation he ran in New York, San Diego, Washington, London, and my hometown of Boston. By the time his stories stopped lining up, it was too late: I’d fallen in love, so in love that I believed him about going straight.

He did try. I have to believe that. I *do* believe he loved me. Problem was, he loved the con more. I deluded myself for a few more months before the final betrayal. Then he was arrested. The case was so solid even *he* couldn’t wriggle out from under.

One thing I had to say for Charlie: he'd been careful to make sure I was blameless. Tried as they might, no charges could be brought against me. Which wasn't to say that I wasn't tainted by my relationship with him. My career as I knew it was over.

I went to work in the small private museum our mutual friend Franklin ran. Charlie was sentenced to fifteen years but barely served three. When he got out, he tracked me down and came to my door quoting Keats, bearing flowers, and begging forgiveness. I showed him the restraining order I'd taken out. He didn't take it well, but he left. That was six months ago.

When Franklin called me into the museum that Monday, he showed me the painting and the note that came with it. Both had been addressed to me. *You might prefer to display the original*, the printed note said.

"I apologize for opening your mail, but I thought it was the lithograph we were waiting for. This painting, Mary, is authentic," Franklin said.

"But—how can it be? Niles Richards' 'Old Friends' hanging upstairs. We're not shipping it to Chicago until next week."

"It appears that our entire Lindstrom collection has been replaced with forgeries," Franklin said.

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J.A. (Julie) Hennrikus has ten published novels in three different series, all of which are cozy/traditional. Her most recent series was The Garden Squad series written as Julia Henry for Kensington. She has also written several short stories.

Julie has worked in arts administration for over thirty years, primarily in the performing arts. She continues to teach arts administration as adjunct faculty at Boston area colleges. Her passion for supporting other creatives navigate the business side of the arts has fueled her career.

In addition to writing, she is the executive director of Sisters in Crime, a crime fiction writing and advocacy group with over 4,000 members. Julie lives in Massachusetts, has a strong social media presence, and blogs on [WickedAuthors.com](http://WickedAuthors.com). [JHAuthors.com](http://JHAuthors.com)