

If At First You Don't Succeed

Diane Vallere

Several years ago, I wrote the first sentences of what would become PILLOW STALK, the first of the Mad for Mod Mysteries:

“What about Doris Day?” I asked.

Six sets of eyes stared me down like it was the worst suggestion they'd ever heard.

I admit that I was a bit in love with the whole project—interior decorator who models her style and her business after a Doris Day movie and ends up involved in a homicide investigation when women dressed like the actress start turning up dead—and when the book was finished and polished, I sent it out and sat back, waiting for the offers of representation to pour in. I had some nibbles, too, requests to see the first 100 pages, requests to see the entire manuscript, but none of the nibbles resulted in what I wanted: a gushing endorsement that what I'd written was un-turn-down-able, leading to an offer of representation.

PILLOW STALK wasn't my first manuscript, and in the process of learning how to improve my writing and my pitch, I'd learned one thing. You can easily ignore when one person doesn't connect with your work, but when a whole bunch don't connect, you'll best reexamine what it is you wrote.

My original first 2 pages (in which I intro the character at a meeting of movie theater volunteers, accidentally show her as snarky in my zest to have her seem modern, establish her age and discuss her daily habits; intro 4 additional characters; hint at the Doris Day angle; acknowledge the weather; and almost toss in the kitchen sink):

“What about Doris Day?” I asked.

Six sets of eyes stared me down like it was the worst suggestion they'd ever heard.

I didn't care, because after spending the past forty-eight and a half minutes listening to them talk about Arnold Schwarzenegger circa 1994, Richard Boone circa 1978, and the Stanley Donen disaster Blame It On Rio (which should have been called “Blame It On The People Who Thought This May-June Movie Would Resurrect The Career Of A Director Who Should Have Quit While He Was Ahead”) I was ready to go home.

I figured it was time they listened to me. I'd been up since four-thirty, like I was every morning and while I often found those early morning hours to be my most productive, I also knew that productivity wreaked havoc on my mental acuity after eight-thirty PM.

The hands on my watch stood poised at eight twenty-seven.

“What about Doris Day?” said Richard, the twenty-seven year old film school graduate who spent every Tuesday's calendar meeting suggesting Werner Herzog movies.

“What about a retrospective of Doris Day movies for that weekend?”

Again with the blank stares.

“It's hot. It's Dallas. Everybody's miserable. What if we crank the AC for seventy-two hours, line up three days of her best six movies and see what kind of a crowd we pull in? Even at ten dollars a person it'll only take sixty people to break even on the equipment and utilities. I bet we can get decent prints for cheap this time of year. We could even add ice cream and otter pops to the concession stand....”

“I'm not cleaning up after no otter pops,” said Jerome. I wasn't surprised. Jerome never cleaned up after any of our theme weekends and I don't think any of us expected him to start now.

“Face it, you're looking at a loser weekend but we haven't had the theater reopened long enough to close for those four days. I'll work up the budget and make the initial contacts about acquiring the prints.” The edge to my voice came from a combination of hunger and sleeplessness. And a mild sugar headache because Ruth Cobern, thirty-seven year old mother of three sitting to my left had graciously provided us with a plastic Tupperware of rice krispi treats for our meeting and I was not one to turn down marshmallow goodness when it arrived to my left with no strings attached.

“You know, my oldest is the spitting image of Doris in Pajama Game. She's been acting in her school play, the seventeen year old? I know I don't look old enough to have a seventeen year old,” Ruth said, and smiled at Richard. He looked at the floor. “I bet we could use her as a lookalike.”

Hmmm. I guess there were strings attached to those rice krispi treats after all.

“I'm sure you looked like her, too, when you were younger, Madison,” she said directly to me.

“Doris Day was thirty-seven when she made Pillow Talk,” I said.

“Are you thirty-seven, too?” she asked like she'd just discovered we were sisters separated at birth. I was almost too pleased to burst her bubble.

“No, Ruth, I'm forty-seven.”

(The benefit of hindsight has me twitching for a red pen to mark changes as I type this.)

I asked for volunteers from an online writing group to read my first 5 pages and give me feedback. I recruited ten people who were willing to do so. They were armed with only my 85-word pitch (think back cover copy) and what they found on those pages. A part of me thought they'd return with claims that there was nothing wrong with my opening, and convince me that I just hadn't pitched the right person yet.

That's not what they said.

The feedback I received was valuable because it told me things about my own writing that I hadn't seen myself. I'm not talking about mistakes—the manuscript was clean at this point—but about the amount of information that I'd stuffed into those early pages, and the way the protagonist, Madison Night, comes across. By the time I'd finished writing the book, I'd found her voice, but even now when I look

back at my original opening, I can see that I hadn't yet found it in chapter one, and we all know what they say about first impressions.

I went back to the drawing board and wrote three new opening paragraphs:

#1 (in which I establish the main character's name and talk about the weather):

"Mr. Johnson, this is Madison Night. First, let me say, I'm sorry for your loss." My opening line was met with silence, so I continued. "Losing a loved one is never easy."

"What was your name again? Madison? What are you, twenty?" said the angry voice on the other end of the phone. I was used to people fixating on the least important detail of my phone call, my name. I pushed my long hair away from my face, then used my index finger to free a couple of strands that were stuck by my hairline, thanks to the Dallas-in-May humidity.

#2 (in which I summarize seemingly unrelated events, introduce the main character, and talk about the weather):

A flat tire, an angry client, and a woman who had died after four thirty. That's what I discovered when I stormed out of the meeting.

It was hot—Dallas in May, hot—even at eight o'clock at night. That meant Dallas in June and Dallas in July would be off the charts. Bad enough for a transplanted northerner, but even worse for someone with a chronic knee injury that doubled in size in direct relation to the humidity index.

I even remember starting a third with the hostile opening sentence: "Doris Day is dead," that led to an exchange between characters about the actress's relevance. Funny, I didn't save that one to my computer.

Elements of what I wanted to convey in that opening scene were there, but not to my liking. I retooled, noodled about, scrapped what I had, and started over. My goal: intro the character as contemporary business woman. Hint at the Doris Day angle, but make it clear that this is not a historical. Keep the scene focused. Maybe not talk about the weather.

The final 1st two pages (in which I introduce the character, indicate her business and show her at work, hint at the Doris Day angle, and—darn it—talk about the weather!):

"Mr. Johnson, I'm calling to discuss the disposition of your mother's estate," I said into the yellow donut phone.

"Are you a lawyer?" asked a gruff voice on the other end of a crackly line.

"No, sir, I'm an interior decorator. Madison Night. I own Mad for Mod on Greenville Avenue." I paused, giving him time to react. When he didn't, I continued. "I assure you I mean no disrespect. In my experience, you are about to be faced with the time consuming challenge of handling your mother's

affairs, and I am in a position to take a portion of that challenge off your to-do list.” Internally, I cringed at the holier-than-thou tone that had crept into my voice. It was an oral knee-jerk reaction to people not taking me seriously. “Mad for Mod specializes in mid-century modern design. Your mother’s house was—”

“What was your name again? Madison?” he snapped. “What are you, twenty?”

“Madison was my grandmother’s maiden name.” I pushed my long hair away from my face, then used my index finger to free a couple of strands that were stuck to my hairline, thanks to the Dallas-in-May humidity. “I’m forty-seven, and I’ve been in this industry for over twenty years.”

The man was obviously more distraught over the death of his mother than the fact that my grandmother’s surname had come into fashion sometime in the nineties, but at times like these, minor details could change the course of our conversation.

“My mom didn’t have anything valuable. Her whole house was insured for fifteen thousand dollars, and I’d be better off if it had burned down and I got the check. Now I’m stuck with a bunch of junk I could never convince her to throw away.”

I wrote \$15,000? on the side of a real estate flyer that sat on my desk and put on my best can-do attitude. “Mr. Johnson, I’m prepared to make an offer on the entire estate. If you accept it, I can bring you a check tomorrow, and you can be on your way back to Cincinnati as soon as tomorrow night.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re offering to write me a check for stuff you haven’t even seen?”

“That’s correct.”

“Lady, if this is a joke, you have a lousy sense of humor.” He hung up on me.

I drummed my fingers against the top of my desk and stared at the flyer, temporarily distracted by the overdone graphics and the photo of the listing agent.

Pamela Ritter, a recently licensed realtor, stared back at me, a picture of blond hair and blue eyes not all that different from my own, though she was half my age. *Blast from the Past!* screamed the heading, above listings for a string of ranch houses on Mockingbird. *Live like a Mad Man!* promised the copy on the side. Turquoise bubbles filled the background of the paper, and starbursts, outlined in red, gave it a comic book *Pow! Bam! Bop!* feel.

Pamela had jumped on the new movement to capitalize on all things fifties, thanks to a recent pop culture focus on the Eisenhower era. I’d been nurturing my passion for mid-century decorating since I was a teenager, since I first watched *Pillow Talk* after learning that I shared a birthday with an actress named Doris Day. I had surrounded myself with items from the atomic age long before Pamela was born, and thanks to my business, I’d found a community of others who shared my interest and

appreciated my knowledge. I crumpled up the flyer and tossed it at the trash bin. It bounced off the rim and landed on the carpet.

What I didn't put in those first two pages: the murder. The physical handicap of Madison (torn ACL). The back story. The love interest(s).

I figured I'd save something for page three.



After two decades working for a top luxury retailer, Diane Vallere traded fashion accessories for accessories to murder. SUEDE TO REST, the first book in the bestselling Material Witness Cozy Mystery Series, was a Lefty/ Best Humorous Mystery nominee. Diane also writes the Mad for Mod Mystery Series, featuring a mid century modern interior decorator, and the Style & Error Mystery Series, featuring a former fashion buyer. Diane started her own detective agency at age ten and has maintained a passion for shoes, clues, and clothes ever since.