0600 Can’t sleep

Joe Vaverka

Last dream keeps recycling—grab a pad and pen and see what leaks out

The Pantry

Edward James Crawford, a successful West Coast efficiency engineer (aka trouble shooter) was assigned to travel to the Midwest to look at a recent partial acquisition of an older but still profitable parts manufacturing facility in Pleasant Valley, Nebraska.

James, as he likes to go by, is a college educated man who knows that every problem has an answer as to why it happened and a solution or logical fix to make it work again. His world is black or white, no weird hocus pocus stuff had any place in it.

James checked out Pleasant Valley on his way into town. It was a healthy community of 3500 who seemed to have pride in their town, a big plus. James checked in at the front office and asked Jean, the go-to, get it done person who knew the company and employees better than anyone. Her great grandfather founded the town and the blacksmith in 1887 that turned into Valley Manufacturing. Jean preferred to run the front desk and leave the boring stuff to her brothers. She introduced James to the brothers, showed him his office with everything that Corporate said he would need. Jean filled James in on the company and town history, making sure that he heard that the family still had a 51% controlling interest in Valley Manufacturing.

At the end of the day, James asked about what hotel he was to be staying at, Corporate was unclear about that point.

“Oh!” Jean said, “We wouldn’t dream of you living in some dumpy old hotel room. The boys just put the finishing touches on Grandpa’s place about a mile and half down the road. The sheds are still old but the main house has new everything in a retro kind of way.”

James got settled in at Valley, fixing a lot of little problems and bringing the company all the way into the new millennium. The people in town were all very nice to him knowing that he was making all their jobs a little more secure.

James was also getting settled into the old farm house when one morning there was a note laying on the table. It just said, “need 40lb flour, 10lb sugar, salt, beans.” It was on an old yellowed paper written in what looked like charcoal. He thought, “This looks like a mystery for Jean, the historian.”

James showed the note to Jean and her eyes got really big and a smile filled her face. “I think I know what this is about. I will fill the order and have it ready for you to take home with you.”

On his way out, he saw Jean packing a large box and stopped to ask if it was what he was supposed to take home for one of the neighbors.

Jean said, “Well, yes and no. I want you to take it home and put it in the back pantry, close the door and leave it there.”

“That’s a little odd. Is one of the neighbors going to come over to pick it up?”

She answered, “No, I doubt it will be one of the neighbors. Let me show you something.” She picked up a half used pencil and some papers from the table. “These are from Company archives. They are over 100 years old. This is a #2 lead pencil, 6 sided, half used with the letters “ing” still showing. This box of pencils is labeled wrong, just like this old one. This is a spiral bound steno pad also yellowed and brittle and 100 years old with a black mark on the side just like the new ones I put in the box. Now look in the box—40 pounds flour, 2 Morton salts in round boxes, 5 pounds sugar, assorted cans of vegetables, fruits, and this #2 pencils with Valley Manufacturing stamped on them upside down and two new steno pads that I marked on the side. Now take this marker and write your name down the side of this box.” James complied. “Now look at this photo of Grandpa in his office in about 1936…and look up on the top shelf.”

“Ah that…that’s impossible. I just now signed that box,” James said with a shudder.

“Put it in the pantry tonight and let me know in the morning if it’s gone.”

The next day James went into the office and told Jean that the box was indeed gone this morning.

Family history according to Jean, several mysterious food boxes showed up in that pantry that year. Jean and James filled several more orders that winter from nice white strips of steno paper and in pencil.

By spring, the orders stopped coming, but one of the later boxes came back with a nice warm friendship quilt inside. By now, this didn’t disturb James a bit.

James’ corporate headquarters was asking when he would be done in Pleasant Valley, so they could send him on to another assignment. James didn’t want to leave Pleasant Valley. It felt like home to him and he had fallen in love with the town.

A day or two later, the western sky became dark and foreboding and the TV was issuing thunder storm warnings. Coming from the west coast, James had never experienced a real Midwest thunder storm. He bundled up in his quilt and went off to sleep. All of sudden, he was awakened by a brilliant flash and almost simultaneously a deafening clap of thunder. James jerked up and hit his head on the inside of the roof of the back seat of his car. “Ah, what the hell…how did I?” There was a flash, a loud bang, followed by another flash and louder bang. James saw the huge cottonwood tree laying where his bedroom used to be. “Ah, how did I get in my…car?”

James felt bad about having to tell Jean about what happened to the farmhouse, but news travels fast in a small town. As James walked in, Jean said, “It looks like you made a really old friend at that farmhouse last night.”

“How did you find out so fast?”

“Well, young man, 90% of the volunteer fire department works for me and besides, I am the fire chief. Haven’t you figured out your connection to that farmhouse yet?”

“Ah, no,” he replied.

“Well, my great grandfather was James Edward Crawford, so we’re cousins, you dope. How long is it going to take you to say goodbye to those cheap skates out in California and come home to work for family?”

James moved back to Pleasant Valley as head engineer, increasing profits enough to buy back the 49% stock, so it is now 100% in the family again.

*There were actually two Pleasant Valley towns in Nebraska, both now long gone.*