



A SWIFT ENTERPRISES INVENTION STORY

Damon Swift and the Folding AutoCar

By T. Edward Fox

It is nearing a decade until the end of the century. The last thing anyone at the Swift Construction Company is thinking about is a forthcoming Middle East war. Indeed, they have a much more immediate threat on the horizon: bankruptcy!

Damon Swift's father, George, may be schooled as a businessman, but he has no idea what it takes to operate an invention-driven factory. It is running, but into the ground. So, Damon and the executives form a committee and request that George step aside in favor of Damon.

But, what a mess he steps into. A project favored by his father has eaten up almost all operating funds without a plan to recoup them. So, he comes to a make-or-break decision.

Can Damon save the company his family has owned for decades?

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This story is dedicated to my father who never wanted to be part of the family company, and who sold it once his father retired. It drove a wedge between them for years, but allowed my father to finally do the things he wanted to do. It took heavy brass on his part, but the family survived and became stronger for the experience.

Damon Swift and the Folding AutoCar

FOREWORD

Precursor to Swift Enterprises, the Swift Construction Company has been churning out a series of successful inventions since the early nineteen hundreds. From submarines to searchlights to airplanes, construction machines to electrical devices, weapons of peace to weapons of war, they have carved out a place in U.S. history.

And, until the day when George Swift found himself taking the reigns of the company he never wanted to run, they had made money.

A businessman but not a forward thinker, George began investing company money in unnecessary equipment, purchasing overstocks of materials that soon became obsolete, and undertaking projects that "sounded good at the time," but that had no place at the Swift company.

Between chronicling a previous generation and then the exploits of George's grandson, Tom Swift, I kind of let things slip. How nice to see the story of how George's son stepped in and saved the company.

Victor Appleton II

CHAPTER 1 /

YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!

GEORGE SWIFT sat at the desk his own grandfather first purchased from the Sears catalog for \$35.00 and had sat at decades earlier. He was drumming his fingers on the large blotter that covered the middle portion, hiding a few deep grooves plus a couple lifetimes of leaked ink, cigarette burns and neglect.

He was close to panic and his trembling hands bore mute witness to his state of mind.

His own father had all but forced him into the family business forty-nine years earlier, just a month before the Second World War slammed into both the country and the Swift Construction Company.

Overnight, orders for most of their traditional products, with the exception of several devices already being made to meet military contracts, dried up.

Engines for an automobile company in Canada? "Sorry, but circumstances..." etc!

Wing assemblies for a new sea plane to begin flying to Cuba the next summer? "Due to the war we find that we must rethink..."

And, so it went down the list.

About the only thing that saw them through the first two devastating downturn years were orders for replacement parts for equipment built years earlier. The staff had been let go, one-by-painful-one until the company that once boasted over fifty employees, making them one of Shopton's largest employers, settled down with only fifteen.

But, George had been determined to survive, and survive he—and the Swift Construction Company—did. As the war in Europe reached the fall of 1943, he had managed to hire back more than half of the good men—and the two women—who had been let go. Several people had moved from Shopton, three had passed away while others had new positions with other companies. He had a payroll of seventy-two people on the day when we dropped the final atomic bomb on Japan.

Once the war was over, George had been totally out of his element in trying to gain new contracts and build many of the new devices his designers were coming up with.

The biggest problem George Swift has was this: he had absolutely no idea what the Construction Company could do, and frequently either oversold or dramatically undersold their capabilities to prospective clients.

It was only by dint of the war in Korea and then Viet Nam, and then conflicts all over the Middle East that the company continued to slog along.

Now, it was almost 1990 and things were on a downward spiral, and George sat in despair and sadness at his grandfather's desk, drumming his trembling fingers.

The worst part of all, he kept telling himself, is that nobody out there—and by that he was *fairly* certain he meant the world at large and not his employees—had an appreciation for the next great thing he had the designers working overtime on: *The Swift Collapsible Small Two-Man Motor Vehicle*.

Looking at the framed drawing of the car he had hoped to produce a prototype of three years earlier, he had to smile. The name had been his idea, even though one of his young employees, George Dilling in the advertising and communication department had thought it overly long and difficult to "sell" to the people. Whatever that meant!

His secretary knocked politely on the door before entering. She never waited for his invitation as he rarely remembered to make one.

"Today's mail, Mr. Swift," she said trying to put a brave face on. She had seen the two envelopes from a pair of their suppliers. Instinctively, she realized they were dunning letters, asking for monies to be paid, immediately. Monies that she also knew the accounts of the Construction Company did not have.

He accepted them from her, glanced at them and let out a lengthy sigh. They could wait. Everything could wait. It had up to now and would for a few more days or weeks or months. Until—

George looked at the grandfather clock sitting in one corner of the office. Seeing the time, he opened his top drawer, swept the envelopes into it, and pushed it shut.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll make sure the men know we have to get that vehicle on the road!

He tried to get angry. Tried to muster up frustration with someone else, but failed. He could not.

Taking down the trilby hat he continued to wear even though men in hats had gone out with the early sixties, he left by the back door and headed to his automobile.

Fifteen minutes later he pulled up into one of the ten parking spots at the small regional airport, got out and walked to the small building that served as the ticket office, waiting room, baggage station, shipping and receiving, and also had a small revolving light on the very small shack that perched on the roof.

In the distance he and the other three people waiting could hear the roar of the ancient Fairchild F-27 operated by the

small airline that serviced Albany, Shopton, Thessaly and Oswego, all in upstate New York. A minute later, George believed he could see the bright green turboprop plane and the trail of exhaust gases the two engines gave off.

The plane made a low half circle turn at the south end of the field and came in for a landing. The pilot was a skilled man and made the same trip and approach five days a week, always touching down just a few hundred feet from the end of the runway and rolling out to the far end before turning to come to the terminal.

The ground crew, a fellow named Geoff, waited until the near prop stopped moving, and then pushed forward the two-step platform to the door. A moment later the door opened and Geoff pushed it back against the fuselage.

The very first person out looked toward the crowd and gave a big wave.

George, feeling a sudden surge of pride, waived back. It was his son, and only child, Damon. Damon strode across the tarmac and shook his father's hand. "Hey, Father. It's good to see you again. How are things?"

George's gaze dropped. "We can talk about that later. First, let's get your suitcases and take you home. I only wish that your mother were still with us. She'd be mighty proud of all you've accomplished."

Damon's mother, Mary, has passed away five years earlier while he was finishing his Masters studies at MIT. It had been sudden and unexpected and had hit his father particularly hard. And, though the school had offered to let him bypass the upcoming dissertation, he politely refused asking, instead, to reschedule it for a week later.

Damon Swift had been working hard on the Space Shuttle program for NASA ever since.

Now, with his part of the design and recent overhauls nearing completion, and his young wife, Anne and their two children—three-year-old Tommy and two-year-old Sandra— anxious to get out of the Florida heat, humidity and incessant bugs, he was coming back to Shopton where he hoped to go to work in the family company.

It wasn't until the two men were sitting on the front porch of the small cottage near to Lake Carlopa, having a beer that the subject of future employment came up.

Damon could immediately see that the question distressed his father. He asked, "What's going on, Father? I mean, *really* what is going on?" He looked seriously at his father's face trying to read anything that might be there.

George put his beer down and rubbed his hands over his face.

"It isn't good, Damon," he admitted. "Not good, at all. Ever since Viet Nam War got over, our orders have gone downhill. Everything we switched over to build to the military is now so much poisonous junk. Nobody wants it and we still have a lot of supplies, components and materials that can only go into making more of the same. It is all too old to be used for anything new the Government might want."

Damon told him of his desire to come to work there.

"Oh, Damon, Damon, Damon," George practically moaned. "I don't even know if there will be a company in a week. How can I have you move Anne and the kids up here only to have to tell you that everything is gone?" He looked, beseechingly, into his son's eyes.

Damon sat there sipping the last of his beer, thinking. He got up and went inside, coming back out with another two cans. Handing one to his father, he said, "I'm not a businessman, Father. I'm a trained scientist, aerospace designer and I've

been dabbling in inventing things like Grandfather Tom. But, I've also had to run my department at NASA taking care of budgets, orders and personnel issues. Let me come in tomorrow and I'll see if there's something I can do. Okay?"

George reluctantly agreed.

The next morning they drove to the Construction Company together. Damon got out of the car telling his father, "I'm going to take a look around and familiarize myself with what we've got. Meet you in the office in an hour or so," and he stalked off in the direction of the number one factory building.

He said hello to the people he knew from before college days and met a few of the newer employees. By the time he had gone through the first building, Damon came to a conclusion. There was something horribly wrong with the attitudes and body language of just about everyone there.

He walked to the second building. There, he was met with a lot more of the same. People glumly doing their jobs, but at about half the speed he knew they could go. There was little talking going on, and certainly no joking or story telling, something he knew wasn't normal.

Damon sought out the one man he believed could give him a straight answer. George Dilling.

Dilling had been hired the previous summer and Damon had gotten to know the man during a two-week vacation in Shopton. Only about a year older than Damon, George had taken to his employer's son the first time they met. It had been mutual. To his dismay, he discovered that Dilling had left the company a month earlier following a dispute with George Swift!

Damon walked to the office building and right past the secretary. She meekly smiled and gave him a little wave as he passed by.

"Care to tell me what the dickens is going on out there?" he asked his father, sweeping his right arm out toward the construction buildings. "And, what's this about you and George Dilling having a spat? I thought you and Fred Bartleby figured he was the next best thing to sliced bread!"

"Son. I really don't want to talk about that. Dilling had his opinion about how we should be doing things here at the company and I had mine. My company, my decision about what we do and how we do it. He left. End of story!"

Damon sank into the small sofa on the far wall of the office. "Alright then. What about the attitude I can only describe as being funereal out on the lines? People are standing there, doing their jobs with no joy, no chatter and no sense of accomplishment. Is *that* your way of doing things?" He was livid now and his face scarlet with anger.

George could see this and opted to not bark back. Instead, he softly said, "The mood out there is a little glum right now. We've hit a rough spot and everyone senses that a staff reduction is coming. It can't be helped. As I told you last evening. We've been stuck with an inventory of parts we can't use and a product that can save this company wallowing in design hell."

Damon stood up and began pacing the small office. "Yeah. I've talked with a couple of the designers about that. It seems that the wallowing is all yours. They tell me that we could have been building it a couple years ago but that you keep changing specifications on them. Just what do you think you're doing?" He was now shouting at his father, standing there with hands on his hips as if ready for a quick-draw contest.

All of his father's bravado dropped away and the man began shaking. "I'm sorry, Son. Things happened years ago that we could never foresee and they have all just wadded up in my face this past year. The little car project might have been complete

except that I have never been satisfied with the design. It just isn't what I expected it to be. Can't you see that?"

Shaking his head, Damon told him, "No! I used to hear you complaining to mom that you were angry with grandpa for dragging you into the company all those years ago. I always felt that you never gave the company the energy it has deserved. Now, I'm seeing the results of decades of your lack of care, your lack of attention. My god, Father. Your lack of even trying to understand what this place is capable of!"

He stepped to the door, opened it and walked out.

On his way out he stopped and asked the secretary, "Elizabeth? Do you have the address of George Dilling? I need to find him right away."

She gave a quiet nod and then looked pointedly at the still open door to George's office. Reaching into a small metal file box on her side table she rummaged through its contents, finally extracting a file card and handing it to him.

Damon looked and saw that it was both the home and new work addresses for George Dilling. He smiled and gave her a little wink before leaving the office.

Sitting on a tall, padded stool a half hour later, Damon motioned the barman over. "What's a nice advertising man like you doing in a dump like this?" he asked giving the man a smile.

"Damon? My god, it is you. Well, I'll be. Prodigal son returns, or just another vacation?"

"Well, I'd intended it to be a great family reunion and the dawn of a new career, but—"

"Yeah. Right," George said drawing a tall glass of beer from one of the taps and placing it in front of Damon.

"Can you tell me what went wrong? I mean that most seriously, George. I was appalled at what I saw out there this morning. Is it really that bad, and all since just last summer?"

Motioning over the second barman, George wiped his hands on a towel and stepped out from behind the bar. "Let's take that booth," he suggested, pointing. Once they sat down, he looked at Damon. "Want the truth?"

Damon nodded.

"Okay. Here goes. When Fred hired me last summer I thought I had the dream job. A little copywriting, a little instruction manual writing and a lot of good conversation with Fred. Things seemed to be okay until about five months ago. That was when five of the seven major contracts either finished or were cancelled. Your pop, according to Fred—and I don't want this getting back and getting him in trouble..." he looked meaningfully at Damon, "...had nothing in the hopper except for that dratted little car. Plus, even though it seemed that he had plenty of warning about the expiring contracts, he made several large purchases of raw materials and components that we, I mean they, had no orders to back up!"

"What is it about that little car, George?"

"Well, the idea started, according to Fred, to meet a desire by some people to have a small, fuel efficient runabout that they could store in the same garage as their large sedans. The problem as the designers saw it was space. Even in these post-seventies and eighties homes, unless you live in a small town or outside of most cities, the standard is still a wide one-car garage or a very narrow two-car one. So, the designers came up with a two-man car that could be sort of squashed together for storage. Folded."

"And, my father started making design change after change until it either became impossible to manufacture, or until it

just was too late to be a viable product to save the company?"

George nodded. "That's pretty much it. Sorry to have to tell you that, but your pop just isn't a very astute businessman. At least not as far as a company like Swift Construction goes. Fred tells me that things have been bad for at least eight years and folks before him say it's been going on for decades."

Damon didn't go back to work or home to his father that evening. Instead, he and George Dilling went to dinner at a small restaurant on the shore of Lake Carlopa owned by a former high school girlfriend and her husband. Over a fried trout dinner they talked about the company and several ways George could think of that could greatly improve their public and business perceptions.

By the time the place closed at ten, both men were in agreement. Something drastic had to be done, or the Swift Construction Company was doomed.

* * * * *

Three days later, Damon, along with the top five managers at the company, knocked on George Swift's door. The secretary had seen them coming across the front yard and decided to take an early lunch break. She had slipped out the front door just as the committee arrived and had scurried off to the safety of her little Japanese car.

"We need to talk, Father," Damon began. "No, don't get up. Just sit there. This is very serious and we all just want you to sit and listen."

He went through everything he had discovered about bad business decisions and about the combined feelings of the management and staff of the Construction Company.

With each pronouncement of facts, they could all see George Swift shrink further and further into his chair. And, when the

final statement was made, his entire body seemed to deflate.

"Father, because of your mismanagement of this company, and because we can no longer allow it to continue if we want the company to survive—and *we do*—you are hereby removed as manager of the Swift Construction Company."

Totally flustered, George managed to squeak out, "But this is... this is *mutiny!*"

"No, Father, This is your retirement. And, it starts right now!"

CHAPTER 2 /**MAKE OR BREAK TIME, INCLUDING THE RABBIT**

AFTER TAKING his father home and pouring him a very large drink of whisky, Damon sat down and faced the man he had just deposed.

"I'm sorry that we had to hit you with this so hard, but the truth is, we can't survive another day with you running the company." He looked at his father who sat there nursing the last half of his drink. The first half had disappeared in a single, large gulp.

"Your mother would have died on the spot if she had been in my office today. Absolutely died of apoplexy. It's probably a good thing she died when she did." He took another sip and tilted his head. "I don't even know exactly what apoplexy is, but it's a good word, isn't it?" He smiled, wanly, at his son.

"Yeah. Pretty good word. How are you doing?"

George took a minute to look around his living room. "Actually, I feel a sort of peace I can't remember having since around nineteen-sixty-three. And then, some idiot had to go and kill Kennedy the very next day! My life has been filled with absolute crap timing. Heck, I even bought two tickets to take your mother to Hawaii a week before she died." He drained his glass and held it out to Damon for a refill. "Timing!" He snorted.

Returning with a less-full glass, Damon sat and asked, "Are we going to be okay?"

George eyed him, the whisky finally starting to have an effect on him. "You didn't have to bring the posse with you, you know. You could have come on your own."

"Would you have listened, or would you have argued?"

George nodded. "Good point. Okay, what's next?"

"Starting tomorrow I sell off some of the excess materials we have, finalize the design for the accordion car and get the company back into the black!"

George gave another snort and drained his second drink. "Just that?"

"Just that, Father." So saying, Damon left the house and returned to the Construction Company.

The next day would be Friday and he didn't want things unsettled as they approached the weekend, so he called together all of the employees.

"As of today, the Swift Construction Company is in an entirely new business. We have fifteen small products, only four of which sell in any notable quantity. Other than those, everything else stops as of Monday. You folks doing spare parts, keep going but expect to do things differently. On Mondays and Tuesdays, you'll begin installing a couple dies and jigs for a few parts we will be building for StratoDay Manufacturing. I've secured us a small contract to help them backfill a shortage of parts for one of their new small helicopters."

A small cheer came but quickly died down at hearing the news.

"Also as of Monday, we will have a new employee that many of you will recognize because he is an old employee. I've rehired George Dilling to work with Fred Bartleby. They will be doing market research and trying to find us a customer base for new products. I want you all to know that we will be doing something that has never been tried before. We will build some things nobody knows they want and then convince them

they're great."

"What's that, sir?" asked a young man Damon recognized as the son of one of the older employees.

"It's Steve, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. For starters, I am not 'sir.' Call me Mr. Swift if you must, or Damon, which is my name. Now, as to your question... we don't know. That's the truth. I'm hoping that by selling off unnecessary supplies, even at reduced prices, we'll gain enough funding to continue business for another few months. We'll build the accordion car and I've got a few ideas for some electronics. We'll see. After that..." he shrugged.

Everyone went home early for the weekend with more questions than they had answers, but most were happy about the change in management even though a few privately admitted to their wives that it might be a good time to make sure their saving accounts had enough money in them for a few months of scarce times.

That evening, Damon and George Dilling sat on an old bench in front of the office building sharing some cheap bourbon.

"Well, you did it, Damon."

With a rueful chuckle, the new manager of the company replied, "Sure did, George. But, what the heck have I gotten into?"

Holding up his water glass to the fading evening light, Dilling told him, "I'm not certain, but if it works, you're a genius and an industrial whiz kid."

"And, if it fails?"

Dilling poured the last few drops from his glass onto the ground. "Worth about that much I'd say."

Sighing heavily, Damon asked his new found friend, "What do I do?"

George looked right and then left. Seeing that there was nobody around to help him, he reached up and pulled off the fedora he began wearing as a silent protest to the rough handling he had had from Damon's hat-wearing father. Dilling turned it upside down and held it over to Damon.

"Pull a rabbit out!"

Damon glanced at his companion through narrowed eyes and then looked off across the parking lot.

The two sat in silence for a full ten minutes before Swift turned his head and looked at George. "That's it, George! A bit of magic is what we need. Listen..." and he began rattling off ideas.

An hour later they went home, each certain of the bond they were forging and neither certain that it wouldn't all end in tears.

Damon called his wife and told her of the events. Anne Swift was an amazing woman. Trained initially as a biologist, she also had achieved a Doctorate in molecular biology. While Damon had been seeing the Space Shuttles soar skyward, she had finished her education, done a year of research at a laboratory near Miami, and then set it all aside to begin raising their first child, Tommy.

"How long do you give it, dear?" she asked, trying to hide the nervousness in her voice.

"If we can sell off our excess inventory and continue to limp along on the spare parts business, doing that for about four months before either we hit on something, or the layoffs begin. Probably end the same day because that would just about suck the accounts dry."

"When do you want the three of us up there?"

He laughed. "Ah, Anne. I knew I could count on you. Call that real estate agent you've made friends with and put the house on the market. Should get a good price... we're in what they call a seller's market. As soon as you can, get the movers to pack you up, then head north. Just look for the one and only sign for Shopton as you pass through Albany. You can miss it, so don't let the kids mess with you and take your attention away. Otherwise, you'll either end up in Canada or Vermont!"

On Monday, Damon called all of the designers to his office.

"By now, you must have about ten different designs for the accordion car," he told them.

"More like thirty, Damon," said Rex Rhodes, the lead designer. "If it's okay to talk about him behind his back—" Damon nodded, knowing who was meant by that. "Your dad had us changing directions and designs about every month for the past three years."

Damon rubbed his jaw, a little motion he had recently picked up and did when he was thinking. "Okay. What was the original intent and design?"

"Twin cylinder car about four feet wide by six long with more than ten hinged points and a couple of levers. Stop the car and let it cool down about ten minutes, then undo one locked lever and pull it up. That was supposed to spin the engine ninety degrees so that instead of being horizontal—by the way, it was two opposing cylinders, not like a V-2 or straight two—anyway it rotated to vertical after disengaging from the drive train."

"With you so far. What was next?"

"Well, let me think. It all got changed pretty bad eighteen months back. Oh, I remember! You had to be out of the thing before starting the process, for one. So, after flipping the

engine, you pushed a button and three different electrical motors, running off the car's battery, rearranged things like the battery and the exhaust system plus they unlocked the steering wheel and folded up the seats. Then, you pulled down on a second handle and the car sort of folded up into a package about two feet thick, still six feet long, but only about four feet tall."

"And the wheels?"

"They all aligned in one line of four. We had to specify pretty thin tires so they could do that trick, but it all was going to work, until..."

"Sure. Until," Damon told them. "Did you ever get it to prototype?"

They told him about building the first chassis and engine before the constant changes halted that progress.

"Fine. Fine. Pull everything back out all the way to day one and let me take a look at it. Can you all have things ready by Wednesday?"

They agreed that it could be done before close of business the following day.

"Then, on Wednesday morning we go into the automotive business, men. And may heaven help us if I'm wrong about this!"

CHAPTER 3 /**FINDING THE MARKET**

IN THE first two weeks, a great many things happened. Anne and the children arrived from Florida, Damon went through each and every bit of the folding car's design iterations, and began making requests and suggestions in earnest, and the mood among the employees did a one-hundred-eighty degree about face. Getting almost no sleep during that time, Damon finally handed a sheath of sketches and printouts with the things he felt needed to be done to make the folding car.

The first of these was to remove one of the wheels.

After eliciting a collective groan from the group, he explained. "A strong man might be able to pull and push those levers and get the thing open and closed, but what about the average housewife? My own wife, Anne, is powerfully strong but I doubt she would be able to do it. Let me show you something I came up with." He pulled out a large sheet of paper where he had hand-drawn a variation on the existing chassis with the two wheels up front and a single one at the rear with the engine lying just in front and above the single wheel.

His drawing also showed a new set of pivot points and a pair of springs that would exert needed force in both the opening and closing cycles.

All of the designers were amazed and intrigued. Finally, having "one of their own" in charge was going to pay dividends.

Two weeks after that, the first of the new chassis design came out of the Fabrication department. Though it still had several problems—but, as Damon told everyone, what invention didn't

—it proved his concept. Even his secretary could operate the levers with a single hand.

And, while the chassis was being built, the designers had not sat idle. Indeed, they had redesigned the body panels and the hinge and swivel points so that the end package would be even smaller. They designed a way for the entire roof to be brought down by eight inches and the compacted width to nineteen inches. But, the biggest surprise to Damon was the new length.

His design was just two inches shorter than the original, but the car could be pulled in to just over four feet in length now that it only had three wheels to contend with.

"So, how are we going to market this," Damon asked George Dilling at lunch exactly one month since he had taken the company reigns. "Do you have us a target customer?"

"Not an actual customer, but Fred and I have come up with a set of ads to go into a couple magazines." He showed Damon five layouts, the first two looking like practically every other auto ad of the day and barely mentioning the foldability of the vehicle.

"Not really too impressed with those," he told his marketing man. "But, this one..." he pulled out the fourth in the stack, "I am liking quite a bit."

The ad showed the car in both the unfolded state out on a freeway and in its compacted state sitting to one side of a typical garage.

George smiled. "That's mine. Fred came up with numbers one and three and we came up with two and five together. But, we agree that number four gives the best story about the car." He paused and then asked, "What do you think about the slogan?"

Damon had only been looking at the graphics. Now, he

scanned the text of the ad mock-up. Reaching the bottom he chuckled. " 'As easy as an umbrella. Pop it open and just drive it away. Buy one today! ' Pretty good, George. Pretty good."

Just one week went by before George called Damon and asked him to come over to building two. "Got something to show you, Damon."

Striding into the building, Damon's jaw went slack and he stopped in his tracks. There, driving around the open central area of the large building, was one of the folding cars with George at the wheel. He pulled up to the surprised company manager and called out, "Hop in."

They soon drove out of the building and around the entire grounds of the Construction Company.

"I'd take you out on the road, but we don't have NTSB permission, yet. Oh, and your idea to pull off one of the wheels?"

Damon Swift nodded, still a little shocked that he was riding in a working version of the car that he had ordered to be completed just about five weeks earlier.

"Well, that was genius. We classify as a motorcycle and can totally bypass about ninety-five percent of the safety crash tests. Not that we couldn't pass them, eventually, but we don't have the luxury of time. This way, we can go into production in about two weeks—assuming we have your blessing on this version—and can start selling these a week or so after that!"

Damon only had three suggestions. "Let's drop some weight by making this a soft top. Then, pull that cheap AM/FM radio and put in one with a CD player. Finally, let's sell them in three colors: red, white and blue!"

"What price do we put on them?"

"I suppose that depends on what it's going to cost us to make

them. Do we have a good handle on that?" Damon inquired.

George smiled. "Well, the engine comes from a warehouse. Costs us nothing. Today. Cost us nothing three years ago I hear. But, we have about a thousand of them sitting in packing cases from a project we did for a small aircraft manufacturer. They paid for them and then went out of business. We got to keep them, all bought and paid for, in return for not suing them for the remainder of the contract."

"So?"

"And, so, that means we can build the first thousand cars for around eight hundred dollars apiece. The second thousand will run around eleven-seventy, give or take."

Damon pulled out a small calculator and did a few computations. "We need to sell them for about four grand in order to have enough money to pay the bills and get ready to buy materials for that second thousand units. Tell you what. Let's sell it as a bare-bones unit for just under four grand and then offer the radio/CD player as a three hundred dollar upgrade."

"Works for me!" George told him.

The problem was, it didn't work for anyone else. In spite of a healthy advertising campaign and several personal appearances by Damon Swift on the morning programs at the networks in New York City, orders and sales registered exactly fifteen units by the time the folding car had been available for a full month.

The company, once again teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, halted production after building about two hundred of the vehicles. Unsold cars sat folded up in their delivery cases scattered all over the parking lot at the Construction Company, covered by huge tarps.

On a particularly dismal and rainy day, Damon and George were sitting in the office talking about their next move. Just as Dilling was about to tell his boss that he had no ideas, the door opened and Anne Swift poked her pretty face into the office.

Damon summoned some inner strength and rose to greet her with a smile. "Hello, sweetheart. What brings you down here?" he asked giving her a hug and a peck on the cheek.

"Tommy and Sandy wanted to come down to see where daddy works," she told him and went back to open the door wider. There, dressed in a little striped suit was Damon's son, Tom, and in a frilly dress with a big scowl on her face—Damon later found out it was caused by her dislike of the stiff fabric of the outfit—was Tom's little sister, Sandra.

Damon knelt in front of the children and accepted hugs from them both.

"You and George seem to be in some sort of meeting, so we'll just back out and go to lunch. Nice to see you again, George," she told the marketing man.

"Really good to see you, too, Anne. And, the kids. Gosh. Tommy's getting to be a really big boy, isn't he? And, Sandy is just so darned cute!"

"San-ee cute!" declared the blond-headed girl. "San-ee cute, Tommy pig. Tommy pig!" She began giggling.

"Sandra Swift. You know that he said that Tommy is *big*. Not *pig*." Anne grinned at the men as her daughter continued, in a quieter voice, to chant exactly what she had been saying.

Damon had a thought. "Dear? Sit down a moment, please. George and I are having problems trying to sell the folding car. In fact, it isn't looking at all good. I don't suppose you have any ideas?"

Anne Swift narrowed her eyes and thought for a moment

before asking, "Are you advertising them all over the place?"

George spoke up. "Truth is, we can only afford to advertise locally right now. New York state and a little of New Jersey."

"And, this is a convertible car, right?"

"Convertible and collapsible."

She shook her head. "You're *not* trying to sell these to places that have a lot of convertibles? Like California and Florida?"

"We were hoping to get enough sales up here to afford that," her husband explained.

"Hmmm? Can I see the advertisements, please?" she requested.

After looking them over, she sighed and told them, "I see a little problem here. You're selling a collapsible car based only on the fact that it takes up less room in a garage. How about selling it as a solution for people, important people I think, who drive around in those huge limos. I've seen several of them stopped by the side of the freeway on trips down to Albany and into the city."

The men didn't appear to be getting her point.

"I mean, if these things can collapse into such a small package, can't they fit into the trunk of a big limousine? Sell them as the spare car for your big car, or something like that." She nodded as if totally satisfied with her logic.

"I'm going to go do a little research," George told them. "Anne may have something."

Damon kissed his wife and told her, "It may come to nothing, but you might just be right. We never thought about it that way."

She left a few minutes later.

George came back just before five with news.

"We have about five hundred businesses that keep a limo for their big wigs in this country, and those only break down on average of once a year."

"That is supposed to be *good* news?"

"No. Just a fact. But, in Brazil there are over three thousand business-owned limos, huge stretch jobs, all made in France and Brazil. Those have a miserable track record and break down about once a month. Sometimes stranding an executive or two hundreds of miles from help."

Damon brightened as he stated, "And, that is all lost business time to them. Right?" George nodded and grinned. "So, we put out a few feelers down there to see if having a spare car in addition to a spare tire might intrigue them."

"And, South Africa. All of their limos come from the same French factory and have an even more drastic breakdown record."

Within the week, the Swift Construction Company received an official invitation to bring one of their collapsible cars to the Brazilian Embassy in New York City. Five of that nation's top businessmen were in the country to meet with the Ambassador, and all agreed to meet Damon there for a demonstration.

Damon opted to have the most recent car that had come off the line repainted in a green similar to the Brazilian national flag color. He reasoned that it might subliminally influence the foreign businessmen.

He was right.

He and George left the five hour meeting and demonstration—with each of the visitors getting a chance to drive and fold and unfold the car—with orders from four of them, totaling

twenty cars.

"I firmly believe, Señor Swift, that once my competitors see that I have several of your folding autocars, and learn difficult lessons when I make meetings they can not because they have broken down yet again, you will begin seeing many, many other orders. I can only hope," he added with a sly smile and a wink, "that their orders might be delayed a little. It never hurts to have an edge for as long as possible, even if that is only for a few days."

The other men shared his sentiments. Everyone left with smiles on their faces and ideas in their minds.

The purchase orders began coming through a few days later. And then, a surprise request arrived on Damon's desk.

"The Ambassador for South Africa heard about our demo the other day, George, and wants us to take several of the cars to South Africa. *And*," he emphasized, as they sat having lunch that noontime, "they are willing to foot the bill for the trip and the shipping!"

"I'll get on the phone to the library and see what their flag colors are," offered Dilling.

"Red, white, blue, green, yellow and black," Damon told him. "The Ambassador himself suggested that we take cars painted in the first four. We've already got the green one from the demo, and our normal paint colors are the others, so I've accepted the invitation. We leave in five days. Get your passport out of storage. We're going on a trip!"

EPILOG /**KNOWING WHEN TO SAY WHEN**

DAMON SWIFT looked at the man sitting next to him. They were sharing a bottle of cheap bourbon on a bench outside of one of the buildings at the Construction Company.

"You're really certain it's time to pull the plug on the folding car, Damon?" George Dilling asked.

"Yes I do. We've sold a bunch of them in South America and all over the southern half of Africa. Plus the orders from Brazil and even those fifty we sold the South Korea. I'm keeping a close eye on the frequency of new orders and can see the day swiftly approaching—no pun there—when orders dry up."

"You believe it's coming that soon?"

"Yes. And, I'd rather go out of production with a few people still wanting them, maybe even bring the thing back in a year to fill a few orders, than to sit here looking out at a sea of packing cases like we did at the beginning of this little adventure."

"Alright," George said, taking a deep breath through his nose and exhaling. "What's the cut-off point?"

"Three thousand and one," Damon told him with a smile.

"And, one?"

"Sure. You don't think we are going to not keep one around for posterity, do you? Heck, now that we have those other contracts, including the one to subcontract the wings and the avionics for the little plane that two-cylinder engine was originally meant to power, it's time to turn our business eye to the future."

George took a sip of his bourbon, but didn't comment.

"Not to mention that Government contract to build a remote-controlled bomb sniffing robot. That's going to bring in enough money to operate the company for the next several years. No. It's time to retire our little folding car."

Dilling did some mental math. "Well, that means we stop production almost six months to the day from the first one rolling off the line."

"That seems about right. Do you and Fred have some ad ideas for that computer networking and broadcasting device I came up with?"

"Not yet," admitted Dilling with a smile, "but I'll just bet that Anne can come up with something if we can't!"