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# ELON MUSK

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## Adventurers



Winnifred and Joshua Haldeman (*top left*); Errol, Maye, Elon, Tosca, and Kimbal Musk (*bottom left*); Cora and Walter Musk (*right*)

*Joshua and Winnifred Haldeman*

Elon Musk's attraction to risk was a family trait. In that regard, he took after his maternal grandfather, Joshua Haldeman, a daredevil adventurer with strongly held opinions who was raised on a farm on the barren plains of central Canada. He studied chiropractic techniques in Iowa, then returned to his hometown near Moose Jaw, where he broke in horses and gave chiropractic adjustments in exchange for food and lodging.

He was eventually able to buy his own farm, but he lost it during the depression of the 1930s. For the next few years, he worked as a cowboy, rodeo performer, and construction hand. His one constant was a love for adventure. He married and divorced, traveled as a hobo on freight trains, and was a stowaway on an oceangoing ship.

The loss of his farm instilled in him a populism, and he became active in a movement known as the Social Credit Party, which advocated giving citizens free credit notes they could use like currency. The movement had a conservative fundamentalist streak tinged with anti-Semitism. Its first leader in Canada decried a "perversion of cultural ideals" because "a disproportionate number of Jews occupy positions of control." Haldeman rose to become chair of the party's national council.

He also enlisted in a movement called Technocracy, which believed that government should be run by technocrats rather than politicians. It was temporarily outlawed in Canada because of its opposition to the country's entry into World War II. Haldeman defied the ban by taking out a newspaper ad supporting the movement.

At one point he wanted to learn ballroom dancing, which is how he met Winnifred Fletcher, whose adventurous streak was equal to his. As a sixteen-year-old, she got a job at the Moose Jaw *Times Herald*, but she dreamed of being a dancer and actress. So she lit out by train to Chicago and then New York City. Upon her return, she opened a dance school in Moose Jaw, which is where Haldeman showed up for lessons. When he asked her to dinner, she replied, "I don't date my clients." So he quit the class and asked her out again.

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A few months later, he asked, "When will you marry me?" She responded, "Tomorrow."

They had four children, including twin girls, Maye and Kaye, born in 1948. One day on a trip he spotted a For Sale sign on a single-engine Luscombe airplane sitting in a farmer's field. He had no cash, but he convinced the farmer to take his car in exchange. It was rather impetuous, since Haldeman did not know how to fly. He hired someone to fly him home and teach him how to pilot the plane.

The family came to be known as The Flying Haldemans, and he was described by a chiropractic trade journal as "perhaps the most remarkable figure in the history of flying chiropractors," a rather narrow, albeit accurate, accolade. They bought a larger single-engine plane, a Bellanca, when Maye and Kaye were three months old, and the toddlers became known as "the flying twins."

With his quirky conservative populist views, Haldeman came to believe that the Canadian government was usurping too much control over the lives of individuals and that the country had gone soft. So in 1950, he decided to move to South Africa, which was still ruled by a white apartheid regime. They took apart the Bellanca, crated it, and boarded a freighter for Cape Town. Haldeman decided he wanted to live inland, so they took off toward Johannesburg, where most of the white citizens spoke English rather than Afrikaans. But as they flew over nearby Pretoria, the lavender jacaranda flowers were in bloom, and Haldeman announced, "This is where we'll stay."

When Joshua and Winnifred were young, a charlatan named William Hunt, known (at least to himself) as "the Great Farini," came to Moose Jaw and told tales of an ancient "lost city" he had seen when crossing the Kalahari Desert in South Africa. "This fabulist showed my grandfather pictures that were obviously fake, but he became a believer and decided it was his mission to rediscover it," Musk says. Once in Africa, the Haldemans made a monthlong trek into the Kalahari every year to search for this legendary city. They hunted for their own food and slept with their guns so they could fend off lions.

The family adopted a motto: "Live dangerously—carefully." They embarked on long-distance flights to places such as Norway, tied for

first place in the twelve-thousand-mile Cape Town-to-Algiers motor rally, and became the first to fly a single-engine plane from Africa to Australia. "They had to remove the back seats to put in gas tanks," Maye later recalled.

Joshua Haldeman's risk-taking eventually caught up with him. He was killed when a person he was teaching to fly hit a power line, causing the plane to flip and crash. His grandson Elon was three at the time. "He knew that real adventures involve risk," he says. "Risk energized him."

Haldeman imprinted that spirit onto one of his twin girls, Elon's mother, Maye. "I know that I can take a risk as long as I'm prepared," she says. As a young student, she did well in science and math. She was also strikingly good-looking. Tall and blue-eyed, with high cheekbones and sculpted chin, she began working at age fifteen as a model, doing department store runway shows on Saturday mornings.

Around that time, she met a boy in her neighborhood who was also strikingly good-looking, albeit in a smooth and caddish way.

### *Errol Musk*

Errol Musk was an adventurer and wheeler-dealer, always on the lookout for the next opportunity. His mother, Cora, was from England, where she finished school at fourteen, worked at a factory making skins for fighter-bombers, then took a refugee ship to South Africa. There she met Walter Musk, a cryptographer and military intelligence officer who worked in Egypt on schemes to fool the Germans by deploying fake weapons and searchlights. After the war, he did little other than sit silently in an armchair, drink, and use his cryptology skills on crossword puzzles. So Cora left him, went back to England with their two sons, bought a Buick, and then returned to Pretoria. "She was the strongest person I ever met," Errol says.

Errol earned a degree in engineering and worked on building hotels, shopping centers, and factories. On the side, he liked restoring old cars and planes. He also dabbled in politics, defeating an Afrikaner member of the pro-apartheid National Party to become one of the few English-speaking members of the Pretoria City Council.

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The *Pretoria News* for March 9, 1972, reported the election under the headline “Reaction against the Establishment.”

Like the Haldemans, he loved flying. He bought a twin-engine Cessna Golden Eagle, which he used to ferry television crews to a lodge he had built in the bush. On one trip in 1986, when he was looking to sell the plane, he landed at an airstrip in Zambia where a Panamanian-Italian entrepreneur offered to buy it. They agreed on a price, and instead of taking a payment in cash, Errol was given a portion of the emeralds produced at three small mines that the entrepreneur owned in Zambia.

Zambia then had a postcolonial Black government, but there was no functioning bureaucracy, so the mine was not registered. “If you registered it, you would wind up with nothing, because the Blacks would take everything from you,” Errol says. He criticizes Maye’s family for being racist, which he insists he is not. “I don’t have anything against the Blacks, but they are just different from what I am,” he says in a rambling phone discourse.

Errol, who never had an ownership stake in the mine, expanded his trade by importing raw emeralds and having them cut in Johannesburg. “Many people came to me with stolen parcels,” he says. “On trips overseas I would sell emeralds to jewelers. It was a cloak-and-dagger thing, because none of it was legal.” After producing profits of roughly \$210,000, his emerald business collapsed in the 1980s when the Russians created an artificial emerald in the lab. He lost all of his emerald earnings.

### *Their marriage*

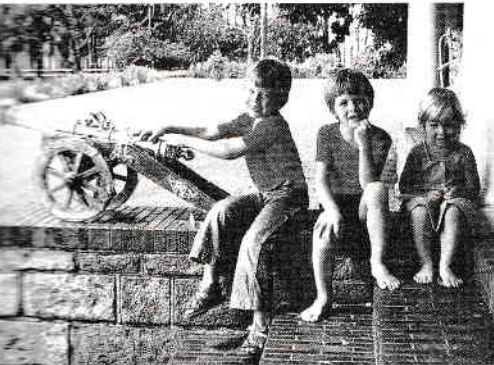
Errol Musk and Maye Haldeman began dating when they were young teenagers. From the start, their relationship was filled with drama. He repeatedly proposed to her, but she didn’t trust him. When she discovered he was cheating on her, she became so upset that she cried for a week and couldn’t eat. “Because of grief, I dropped ten pounds,” she recalls; it helped her win a local beauty contest. She got \$150 in cash plus ten tickets to a bowling alley and became a finalist in the Miss South Africa contest.

When Maye graduated from college, she moved to Cape Town to give talks about nutrition. Errol came to visit, brought an engagement ring, and proposed. He promised he would change his ways and be faithful once they were married. Maye had just broken off a relationship with another unfaithful boyfriend, gained a lot of weight, and begun to fear that she would never get married, so she agreed.

The night of the wedding, Errol and Maye took an inexpensive flight to Europe for their honeymoon. In France, he bought copies of *Playboy*, which was banned in South Africa, and lay on the small hotel bed looking at them, much to Maye's annoyance. Their fights turned bitter. When they got back to Pretoria, she thought of trying to get out of the marriage. But she soon became nauseated from morning sickness. She had become pregnant on the second night of their honeymoon, in the town of Nice. "It was clear that marrying him had been a mistake," she recalls, "but now it was impossible to undo."

# A Mind of His Own

*Pretoria, the 1970s*



Elon and Maye Musk (*top left*); Elon, Kimbal, and Tosca (*bottom left*);  
Elon ready for school (*right*)

*Lonely and determined*

At 7:30 on the morning of June 28, 1971, Maye Musk gave birth to an eight-pound, eight-ounce boy with a very large head.

At first she and Errol were going to name him Nice, after the town in France where he was conceived. History may have been different, or at least amused, if the boy had to go through life with the name Nice Musk. Instead, in the hope of making the Haldemans happy, Errol agreed that the boy would have names from that side of the family: Elon, after Maye's grandfather J. Elon Haldeman, and Reeve, the maiden name of Maye's maternal grandmother.

Errol liked the name Elon because it was biblical, and he later claimed that he had been prescient. As a child, he says, he heard about a science fiction book by the rocket scientist Wernher von Braun called *Project Mars*, which describes a colony on the planet run by an executive known as "the Elon."

Elon cried a lot, ate a lot, and slept little. At one point Maye decided to just let him cry until he fell asleep, but she changed her mind after neighbors called the police. His moods switched rapidly; when he wasn't crying, his mother says, he was really sweet.

Over the next two years, Maye had two more children, Kimbal and Tosca. She didn't coddle them. They were allowed to roam freely. There was no nanny, just a housekeeper who paid little attention when Elon began experimenting with rockets and explosives. He says he's surprised he made it through childhood with all of his fingers intact.

When he was three, his mother decided that because he was so intellectually curious he should be in nursery school. The principal tried to dissuade her, pointing out that being younger than anyone else in the class would present social challenges. They should wait another year. "I can't do that," Maye said. "He needs someone besides me to talk to. I really have this genius child." She prevailed.

It was a mistake. Elon had no friends, and by the time he was in second grade he was tuning out. "The teacher would come up to me and yell at me, but I would not really see or hear her," he says. His parents got called in to see the principal, who told them, "We have

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reason to believe that Elon is retarded.” He spent most of his time in a trance, not listening, one of his teachers explained. “He looks out of the window all the time, and when I tell him to pay attention he says, ‘The leaves are turning brown now.’” Errol replied that Elon was right, the leaves were turning brown.

The impasse was broken when his parents agreed that Elon’s hearing should be tested, as if that might be the problem. “They decided it was an ear problem, so they took my adenoids out,” he says. That calmed down the school officials, but it did nothing to change his tendency to zone out and retreat into his own world when thinking. “Ever since I was a kid, if I start to think about something hard, then all of my sensory systems turn off,” he says. “I can’t see or hear or anything. I’m using my brain to compute, not for incoming information.” The other kids would jump up and down and wave their arms in his face to see if they could summon back his attention. But it didn’t work. “It’s best not to try to break through when he has that vacant stare,” his mother says.

Compounding his social problems was his unwillingness to suffer politely those he considered fools. He used the word “stupid” often. “Once he started going to school, he became so lonely and sad,” his mother says. “Kimbal and Tosca would make friends on the first day and bring them home, but Elon never brought friends home. He wanted to have friends, but he just didn’t know how.”

As a result, he was lonely, very lonely, and that pain remained seared into his soul. “When I was a child, there’s one thing I said,” he recalled in an interview with *Rolling Stone* during a tumultuous period in his love life in 2017. “‘I never want to be alone.’ That’s what I would say. ‘I don’t want to be alone.’”

One day when he was five, one of his cousins was having a birthday party, but Elon was punished for getting into a fight and told to stay home. He was a very determined kid, and he decided to walk on his own to his cousin’s house. The problem was that it was on the other side of Pretoria, a walk of almost two hours. Plus, he was too young to read the road signs. “I kind of knew what the route looked like because I had seen it from a car, and I was determined to get there, so I just started walking,” he says. He managed to arrive just

as the party was ending. When his mother saw him coming down the road, she freaked out. Fearing he would be punished again, he climbed a maple tree and refused to come down. Kimbal remembers standing beneath the tree and staring at his older brother in awe. “He has this fierce determination that blows your mind and was sometimes frightening, and still is.”

When he was eight, he focused his determination on getting a motorcycle. Yes, at age eight. He would stand next to his father’s chair and make his case, over and over. When his father picked up a newspaper and ordered him to be quiet, Elon would continue to stand there. “It just was extraordinary to watch,” Kimbal says. “He would stand there silently, then resume his argument, then stand silent.” This happened every evening for weeks. His father finally caved and got Elon a blue-and-gold 50cc Yamaha.

Elon also had a tendency to be spacey and wander off on his own, oblivious to what others were doing. On a family trip to Liverpool to see some of their relatives when he was eight, his parents left him and his brother in a park to play by themselves. It was not in his nature to stay put, so he started wandering the streets. “Some kid found me crying and took me to his mom, who gave me milk and biscuits and called the police,” he recalls. When he was reunited with his parents at the police station, he was unaware that anything was amiss.

“It was insane to leave me and my brother alone in a park at that age,” he says, “but my parents weren’t overprotective like parents are today.” Years later, I watched him at a solar roof construction site with his two-year-old boy, known as X. It was 10 p.m., and there were forklifts and other moving equipment lit by two spotlights that cast big shadows. Musk put X on the ground so the boy could explore on his own, which he did without fear. As he poked around amid the wires and cables, Musk glanced at him occasionally, but refrained from intervening. Finally, after X started to climb on a moving spotlight, Musk walked over and picked him up. X squirmed and squealed, unhappy about being restrained.

Musk would later talk about—even joke about—having Asperger’s, a common name for a form of autism-spectrum disorder that can

affect a person's social skills, relationships, emotional connectivity, and self-regulation. "He was never actually diagnosed as a kid," his mother says, "but he says he has Asperger's, and I'm sure he's right." The condition was exacerbated by his childhood traumas. Whenever he would later feel bullied or threatened, his close friend Antonio Gracias says, the PTSD from his childhood would hijack his limbic system, the part of the brain that controls emotional responses.

As a result, he was bad at picking up social cues. "I took people literally when they said something," he says, "and it was only by reading books that I began to learn that people did not always say what they really meant." He had a preference for things that were more precise, such as engineering, physics, and coding.

Like all psychological traits, Musk's were complex and individualized. He could be very emotional, especially about his own children, and he felt acutely the anxiety that comes from being alone. But he didn't have the emotional receptors that produce everyday kindness and warmth and a desire to be liked. He was not hardwired to have empathy. Or, to put it in less technical terms, he could be an asshole.

### *The divorce*

Maye and Errol Musk were at an Oktoberfest celebration with three other couples, drinking beer and having fun, when a guy at another table whistled at Maye and called her sexy. Errol was furious, but not at the guy. The way Maye remembers it, he lunged and was about to hit her, and a friend had to restrain him. She fled to her mother's house. "Over time, he had gotten crazier," Maye later said. "He would hit me when the kids were around. I remember that Elon, who was five, would hit him on the backs of his knees to try to stop him."

Errol calls the accusations "absolute rubbish." He claims he adored Maye, and over the years he tried to win her back. "I've never laid a hand on a woman in my life, and certainly none of my wives," he says. "That's one of women's weapons is to cry that the man abused her, to cry and to lie. And a man's weapons are to buy and to sign."

On the morning after the Oktoberfest altercation, Errol came over to Maye's mother's house, apologized, and asked Maye to come