

Elon Musk by Walter Isaacson



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ELON MUSK

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To anyone I've offended, I just want to say, I reinvented electric cars and I'm sending people to Mars in a rocket ship. Did you think I was also going to be a chill, normal dude?

—Elon Musk, *Saturday Night Live*, May 8, 2021

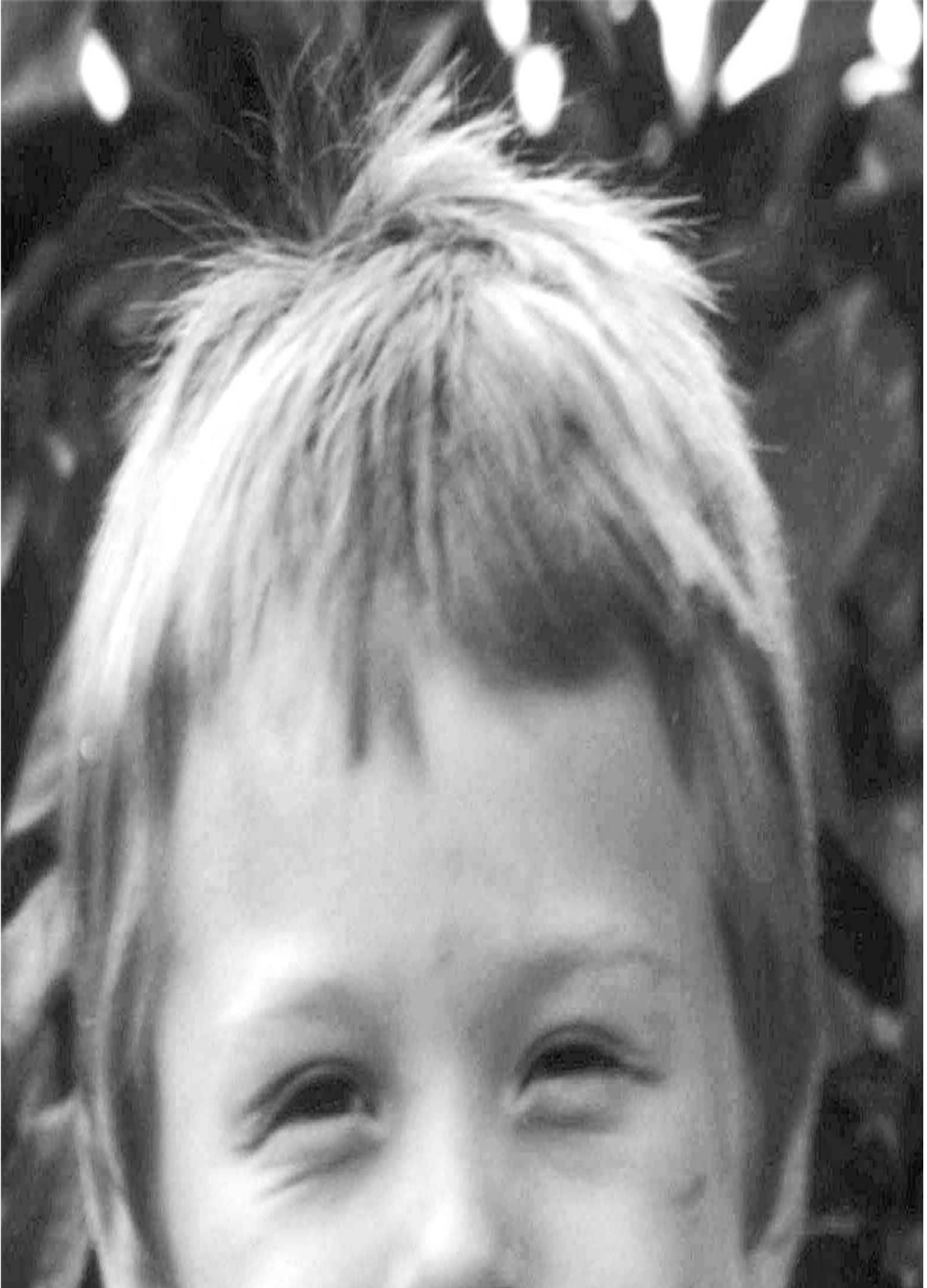
The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.

—Steve Jobs

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PROLOGUE

Muse of Fire





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The playground

As a kid growing up in South Africa, Elon Musk knew pain and learned how to survive it.

When he was twelve, he was taken by bus to a wilderness survival camp, known as a *veldskool*. “It was a paramilitary *Lord of the Flies*,” he recalls. The kids were each given small rations of food and water, and they were allowed—indeed encouraged—to fight over them. “Bullying was considered a virtue,” his younger brother Kimbal says. The big kids quickly learned to punch the little ones in the face and take their stuff. Elon, who was small and emotionally awkward, got beaten up twice. He would end up losing ten pounds.

Near the end of the first week, the boys were divided into two groups and told to attack each other. “It was so insane, mind-blowing,” Musk recalls. Every few years, one of the kids would die. The counselors would recount such stories as warnings. “Don’t be stupid like that dumb fuck who died last year,” they would say. “Don’t be the weak dumb fuck.”

The second time Elon went to *veldskool*, he was about to turn sixteen. He had gotten much bigger, bursting up to six feet with a bearlike frame, and had learned some judo. So *veldskool* wasn’t so bad. “I realized by then that if someone bullied me, I could punch them very hard in the nose, and then they wouldn’t bully me again. They might beat the shit out of me, but if I had punched them hard in the nose, they wouldn’t come after me again.”

South Africa in the 1980s was a violent place, with machine-gun attacks and knife killings common. Once, when Elon and Kimbal got off a train on their way to an anti-apartheid music concert, they had to wade through a pool of blood next to a dead person with a knife still sticking out of his brain. For the rest of the evening, the blood on the soles of their sneakers made a sticky sound against the pavement.

The Musk family kept German Shepherd dogs that were trained to attack anyone running by the house. When he was six, Elon was racing down the

driveway and his favorite dog attacked him, taking a massive bite out of his back. In the emergency room, when they were preparing to stitch him up, he resisted being treated until he was promised that the dog would not be punished. “You’re not going to kill him, are you?” Elon asked. They swore that they wouldn’t. In recounting the story, Musk pauses and stares vacantly for a very long time. “Then they damn well shot the dog dead.”

His most searing experiences came at school. For a long time, he was the youngest and smallest student in his class. He had trouble picking up social cues. Empathy did not come naturally, and he had neither the desire nor the instinct to be ingratiating. As a result, he was regularly picked on by bullies, who would come up and punch him in the face. “If you have never been punched in the nose, you have no idea how it affects you the rest of your life,” he says.

At assembly one morning, a student who was horsing around with a gang of friends bumped into him. Elon pushed him back. Words were exchanged. The boy and his friends hunted Elon down at recess and found him eating a sandwich. They came up from behind, kicked him in the head, and pushed him down a set of concrete steps. “They sat on him and just kept beating the shit out of him and kicking him in the head,” says Kimbal, who had been sitting with him. “When they got finished, I couldn’t even recognize his face. It was such a swollen ball of flesh that you could barely see his eyes.” He was taken to the hospital and was out of school for a week. Decades later, he was still getting corrective surgery to try to fix the tissues inside his nose.

But those scars were minor compared to the emotional ones inflicted by his father, Errol Musk, an engineer, rogue, and charismatic fantasist who to this day bedevils Elon. After the school fight, Errol sided with the kid who pummeled Elon’s face. “The boy had just lost his father to suicide, and Elon had called him stupid,” Errol says. “Elon had this tendency to call people stupid. How could I possibly blame that child?”

When Elon finally came home from the hospital, his father berated him. “I had to stand for an hour as he yelled at me and called me an idiot and told me that I was just worthless,” Elon recalls. Kimbal, who had to watch the tirade, says it was the worst memory of his life. “My father just lost it, went ballistic, as he often did. He had zero compassion.”