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## TOSCA MUSK

Why Elon's not the only one in the family with a big idea

Richard Branson: dyslexia and me

Giles Coren: my night at Britain's wildest restaurant

‘He said to me, “If I give you advice you need to take it, otherwise I will never give you advice again”’



## MY BROTHER ELON AND ME

She’s the sister of the world’s richest man, the billionaire CEO of Tesla and SpaceX. But Tosca Musk is an entrepreneur in her own right, with a female-friendly streaming platform. She tells Helena de Bertodano how they both overcame their difficult childhood



Tosca Musk, 47, photographed by Barry J Holmes at the Hotel Shangri-La, Santa Monica. Opposite: siblings Elon, Kimbal and Tosca Musk with their mother, Maye, at Kimbal’s wedding in Spain, 2018

PREVIOUS SPREAD: KIMBALMUSK/INSTAGRAM; STYLING: SHEENA ANNIRKI/TEMPLETON; HAIR AND MAKE-UP: LOUISE MOON FOR CLOUTIER REMIX USING ORBE AND CHANEL MAKE-UP; SUIT: JONATHAN SIMKHAI; SHIRT: CAMI NYC; SHOES: STUART WEITZMAN; THIS SPREAD: MAYEMUSK/INSTAGRAM; GETTY IMAGES; TOSCAMUSK/INSTAGRAM

If your last name is Musk, there's a fairly good chance you're related to the billionaire inventor-entrepreneur Elon Musk, CEO of SpaceX and Tesla, aka the richest person in the world. Which brings with it a lot of baggage.

"I have a very familiar last name," says Tosca Musk, Elon's younger sister, a film-maker and director who runs the streaming platform Passionflix, which adapts romance novels for the screen. Her name is both a liability and an advantage, she says when we meet in the Santa Monica hotel where she is staying while she edits her latest television film, *Gabriel's Rapture: Part 3*, which premieres on August 12.

"I don't like that my kids watch YouTube and there are jokes about my brother; it makes them feel a little uncomfortable. And they don't understand why people would say [negative] things about him."

Because he's just Uncle Elon to them? "Exactly. And I'm incredibly proud of my older brother. He is a phenomenon. He's exceptional in so many ways and his goals to help humanity are beyond anything that anybody can imagine. So there's no taint at all."

Has she ever thought about changing her surname? "No!" she says, appalled. "I love my name. I don't have an issue with it."

Tosca Musk, 47, is forthright, to say the least. Three years younger than Elon, she is close to both him and her other brother, Kimbal, a successful restaurateur and entrepreneur. "Kimbal's goal is to solve the obesity crisis in America. He's just so human-forward as well."

So while Kimbal, 49, solves the obesity crisis and Elon, 50, saves the world, Tosca is dedicated to bringing happiness to humankind – specifically to women, who make up 98 per cent of Passionflix's audience. "I'm a very strong advocate for positive storytelling," says Musk. "I think we need more stories about love and hope. We have enough sad and depressing movies out there. I hate violence."

As well as adapting romance novels, many of them directed by Musk herself, Passionflix also licenses romance films from studios. For \$5.99 a month, subscribers have access to five different film categories ranked according to a "barometer of naughtiness" – from the Oh So Vanilla category through Mildly Titillating to Not Safe for Work. But make no mistake, this is not an erotic platform: in her own movies Musk does not include any frontal nudity below the waist – and rarely even above – and she objects to any description of the site as "soft porn" or "a guilty pleasure". "I'd rather portray a connection – the love and passion and lust between two people – than show gratuitous nudity. We don't have to spend all of our time looking at breasts."

Musk says that people wrongly associate "passion" with what she calls "the other P word": "There is no passion in porn." She finds it tiresome that critics sometimes dismiss the films as "not real art". "I feel like it's very disrespectful towards the romance genre."

It is not too fanciful to say that her dedication to the genre perhaps springs from the lack of romance in her own life. Her parents' marriage was worse than miserable and she says she has never had a truly meaningful romantic relationship herself. She had her two children, nine-year-old twins Isabeau and Grayson, via sperm donor and IVF. "I didn't want to have children with somebody I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with... And have to be attached to [that person] and have them make decisions about my children and my life ultimately. And I certainly didn't want to go through brutal divorces."

She seems almost too rational to have a platform for romance movies. "I'm very practical and very rational," she agrees. "But I do think that I'm also a romantic and maybe the practicality and the rationality is a little bit of an armour against being as romantic as I could be."

One downside of the surname Musk is that people assume she is wealthy. "That's really annoying. I don't have tons of money. [Elon and I] are not the same person. Also it's not like he's cutting me cheques. We're two different people." In fact, she says, "I'm very frugal. I love a good coupon."

Although Kimbal and their mother, Maye – a dietician and model who at 74 was recently on the cover of *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit* – were small angel investors in Passionflix, Musk will not say if Elon was involved financially. I would assume not, as funding seems to be the biggest hurdle for the platform, still a slim operation with just six employees. Musk prefers to go it alone anyway. "If the idea is good, I should be able to raise the money to do it." She says that Elon occasionally helps in other ways. "He said to me, 'I will give you advice. But if I give you advice you need to take it. Otherwise I'll never give you advice again.' I was like, 'If you give me advice, I will take that advice.'"

So what was the advice he gave you? She answers vaguely: "It was just early on in the starting of Passionflix, more about an ongoing experience."

Does she ever think his advice is wrong? "No, he's never wrong. Not even a little bit." Many people told her Passionflix would be a failure. "They still tell me all the time that it won't work. And we're still here." Like her brothers, she is not easily put off an idea, however ridiculous the rest of the world might deem it. "I think that's probably [true

Kimbal, Elon and Tosca Musk in 1988



**'IT'S NOT LIKE ELON'S CUTTING ME CHEQUES. WE'RE DIFFERENT PEOPLE. I'M VERY FRUGAL'**



Tosca Musk with her twins, Isabeau and Grayson, in 2018

off] everybody in our family. If we say we're going to do something, just believe us we're going to do it.

"A lot of people will say things are not going to work because they aren't used to taking risks. With us, it's like, well, no one's done it before. Doesn't mean it can't be done."

She says she has a similar response if anyone asks if her brother will go through with his purchase of Twitter. (Two and a half months ago Elon offered \$44 billion for the social media platform – but later put the deal "on hold" while seeking information about the number of fake and spam accounts on the

Tosca with her mother, Maye, in 2021



platform.) "If he says he's going to do it I would believe that he's going to do it."

She tells me how Elon once described to her the difficulties of landing a rocket. "He's like, 'Tosca, it's like taking a pencil. And there's an eraser on the one side and I want you to throw it up in the air and I want you to land it on that eraser.' I was like, 'You can't do that.' But he did it."

One of her brother's stated goals with his SpaceX rocket company is to build a full-size city on the surface of Mars, with the first people arriving there in 2029. Will she go? "If my kids want to go I will go to Mars. But other than that, I don't think I will go."

She is easy, convivial company, blunt but ready to laugh. We start the interview by sitting in the almost empty bar at the hotel. The bartender offers us a drink: "Perhaps something virgin without alcohol?" Musk looks at the bartender in amazement. "I'll have something with alcohol. Vodka please."

During the photoshoot she is relaxed and low maintenance. "It takes me two seconds to change," she tells the photographer, proving it. Her children lie on the bed, which they will all share together tonight. Grayson is playing video games and Isabeau is watching YouTube. Their dog, Jane Snuggles, a maltipoo, leaps around them, yapping. They have flown in today from Georgia, where Musk moved them last year – to "a magical forest town" – to make the most of

the state's generous tax credits for filming.

Born in Pretoria, South Africa, Musk and her siblings grew up in Johannesburg. Her mother suffered both physical and mental abuse at the hands of their father, Errol, an engineer. When she eventually summoned up the courage to divorce him, he chased her through the streets with a knife. In her book *A Woman Makes a Plan*, Maye writes that Errol would hit her in the children's presence: "I remember that Tosca and Kimbal, who were two and four respectively, would cry in the corner, and Elon, who was five, would hit him on the backs of his knees to try to stop him." Musk says today that she doesn't recall much about those days. "I don't remember [the abuse] when we were living together. But I remember it as I was growing older. It was more against [my mother] than against me."

In the early days of her childhood, there was plenty of money. Musk – named Tosca after the Puccini opera by her father – remembers "a lovely big house in Pretoria". But everything changed after her parents' divorce in 1979, when she was five. "I don't know what happened to my father's money. Good question..."

She feels that their childhood is sometimes misrepresented. "Some people spew hate language towards us because they think we grew up with a silver spoon and were given everything – which is so far from the truth. When I was growing up it was just a matter of survival."

Musk says she derives her strength from her mother. "I think Tosca's stronger than me," says Maye, when I speak to her a few days later. "She really says it as it is and takes no nonsense. Whereas I can accept nonsense for a while – and then suffer for it." She says that Tosca became her receptionist at the age of five. "From the age of eight she was typing my doctor's reports for me."

It was her mother who introduced Musk to romance novels: Judith Krantz, Danielle Steel et al. Maye explains, "When I was married I read romance books. They just give me some hope in life." Mother and daughter would watch the screen adaptations. "On a Sunday we would watch them together and eat ice cream," says Musk. "That would be our treat."

The three children were close but Musk

**'I REMEMBER THE ABUSE AS I GREW OLDER. IT WAS MORE AGAINST MY MOTHER THAN ME'**

remembers the fights too. "I got chased around and tied up and a dirty sock stuffed in my mouth. All the things that boys do to their younger sisters." Her mother's twin sister had three sons – and the two families spent a lot of time together. "So it was five boys and me. I had to learn how to spit really far."

Elon, she says, loved playing Dungeons and Dragons and would always win. "I would beg to play with him. Within minutes I would roll the dice and die."

I ask her what her strongest memory is of Elon as a child. She thinks for a while. "I'll tell you a story of childhood. When we were younger, we went to Sun City [a resort in South Africa], and Elon ate everything in the buffet and on the way back, he vomited all over me. And I couldn't move because we didn't want to get the vomit on the plane seats. So I had to hold the vomit until we landed. And then I was washed off. Pineapple chunks," she says in disgust. "I mean, pineapple chunks. On me!"

He's going to really thank you for that memory, I say. She shrugs and laughs.

She hated school. "Is anybody happy at school?" When she was a teenager, the family moved to Canada. School was even worse there. "It was horrible. The kids were mean. They all had their cliques; I was cliqueless. I didn't know how to dress because in South Africa we wore school uniforms. Also we had no money at all. We lived in a rent-controlled apartment and we bought our clothes off whatever discount rack there was at the discount store."

So Musk decided to speed up school by studying twice as hard. "I did day school, night school and summer school and finished two years early."

Somehow she also found time to work – first at a fast food outlet, then in a grocery store. Drawn towards film, she bought a video camera when she was 17 and started making short movies. She went on to study film at the University of British Columbia, then worked for Canadian entertainment company Alliance. "It took her 15 years to pay off her student loan," says Maye. In 2001 she wrote and directed her own feature film, *Puzzled*, with Elon as an executive producer.

She co-founded Passionflix in 2017. Presenting it at a romance novel conference, she invited fans of the genre to come on board as founding members. Some 3,000 women paid \$100 to become members with set-visit privileges. She listens to their advice and gives some of them roles as extras. Indeed, it was a fan who suggested the lead actor Giulio Berruti for the Gabriel series – an adaptation of an erotic romance novel published under the pen name Sylvain Reynard, which is one of the platform's biggest draws. ➔

The next day I join her and her head of post production, Margie Goodspeed, for a sound editing session of *Gabriel's Rapture: Part 3*. We watch Gabriel (tall, dark and handsome – of course) rapturing Julia as the rain pours down, thunder rolls and lightning flashes. Musk wants more thunder. “We are milking this whole scene,” laughs Goodspeed. “Oh yes,” says Musk. “I love to milk. We like to luxuriate in the moment.” She becomes momentarily wistful: “But it is beautiful.” Does she get very caught up in it while directing? Goodspeed answers for her: “She’s sometimes crying.”

In the next scene, a similar-looking man is telling the same woman how much he loves her. “Choose me and I’ll give you a happy life. You’ll never have to cry yourself to sleep again.” Hold on, I ask, is that the same man? Musk laughs. “Similar size pecs,” explains Kyle, the sound engineer. “Different man.”

Back in Musk’s real, practical life – where tall, dark, handsome, kind men are vanishingly rare – she decided, aged 37, that it was time to have children. “I rationalised the entire thing. If I meet somebody today, we date for a year; now I’m 38. We move in together; now I’m 39. We decide we’re going to get married; now I’m 40 because it takes for ever to plan a wedding. At 41, we try to have children. Oh, now we can’t. So I’m going to go through all the drugs and hormones that you have to go on in your forties to try to have children. That’s just going to end the marriage right there: that massive amount of stress. So the likelihood of me being able to have children – had I even met somebody at 37 – just didn’t make sense.”

Her family could not have been more supportive. “I told my eldest brother first and he said immediately, ‘I think that’s a good idea. You’d make a great mother. I support you in that.’ My mum was like, ‘Ooh, that’s fabulous. So how do we choose a sperm donor? Do we all just get drunk and spin a bottle?’” In fact a “matchmaker” helped her sift through potential donors. “My matchmaker recommended that I choose somebody that looks like me: tall, blond, blue-eyed, square-jawed – because then my kids will always look like me.”

She has never looked back. “It was the best decision I ever made. I can’t even imagine life without my children.”

Their childhood is very different from hers. “I don’t have the struggle and abuse side of things. So that’s somewhat better... [Also] I raise my kids more like a team member. I include them in decision-making.”

She says there has been no one significant in her life since she had children. “There wasn’t anybody significant in my life before I had children either.” Not even in her twenties? “No. Never. All [my relationships]

were very brief. Certainly there were those childhood crushes.”

Has she been unlucky or does she just have very high standards? “I think that I have standards. High or not. I expect to be treated in a very specific way and I would treat people the same way. I never got that treatment.”

Not that she has ever been badly hurt. “It was more of a ‘meh’ sort of experience in dating. I’m very fortunate that I have a very fulfilling family and life. I’ve never felt I can’t go [somewhere] because I need to have somebody else with me. I’ll go to weddings on my own. I prefer my own company to having to bring somebody who is uncomfortable and makes me spend all my time with them. I have a somewhat intimidating family. You don’t want people being intimidated. [Although] I think some people put it on themselves. My family is superchill.”

Even these days, her favourite activity is reading romance novels at home. “On a Saturday morning I will get my cup of coffee

investing in your company because you will be married to them for ever.”

Although Passionflix is now available in 150 countries and dubbed into 9 languages, subscriber numbers are relatively modest. “Six figures” is as specific as Musk wants to get. In the next decade she hopes that the platform will become a household name and that she can start making major movies. “I would love to make the \$50 million or \$100 million epic romance films – I could make a movie like *The English Patient* or *Shakespeare in Love*; those are within my genre. And I’m not going to shy away from an Academy award.” She’s joking but it would be foolish to underestimate her. She is, after all, a Musk.

The siblings remain close. “I don’t know if they’ll agree with me – but I think we share a lot of characteristics. We certainly enjoy each other’s company... We try to see each other as often as possible. Kimbal’s a chef so he’ll cook dinner. Normally we’re just hanging around the table and having a chat and laughing.” Even

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## ‘I DON’T WANT A DATE WHO’S INTIMIDATED BY MY FAMILY. THEY’RE SUPERCHILL’

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and I will go and sit on my chaise longue, which has a beautiful view of the forest. I will sit there for hours and read a book while drinking coffee. And the kids pitter-patter around. It’s beautiful.”

Later in the day she will switch to a glass of wine. “Or a bottle. Depends on the day.” She has even launched a Passionflix wine – with the slogan “Toe Curling Yumminess” – and has plans to expand the range.

So far she has raised almost \$22 million for the platform and is hoping to raise a further \$10 million. It’s the most complex part of the business. For a start, “[People] couldn’t invest in the company because they thought they would have a close connection to my brother.” Second, the movie industry is still a male-dominated world. “We would normally pitch in a room full of men who would be like, ‘Haha, fantastic, tell me more about the [she adopts a leery voice] romance genre.’” She had dinner with one potential investor. “He said, ‘OK, I’ll give you three [million dollars] but I’ll own 50 per cent of the company. And let’s discuss this up in my room.’ I was like, ‘No, I don’t need to go to your room because we’re sitting here. Also, you’re not going to own 50 per cent of my company, because that’s not what I’m offering.’ And he goes, ‘Well, where else are you gonna get the money?’

“Actually,” she continues, “this is one of the best pieces of advice that I got from my brothers: ‘You should pay attention to who is

Elon occasionally cooks. “He once made exceptional cinnamon buns.” From scratch? “Probably not. But it was more than putting them on a plate. There was some doughy thing he had to do. They were delicious.”

She hasn’t ruled out a partner in her future. “There’s no reason why I can’t meet somebody and get married now. My brother Kimbal actually says I’m a great catch. Because I don’t want anything from anybody. I’ve got a great family, a great company, a wonderful home. I don’t need anything. The only thing I need is a really great person. And I don’t even need them.”

“I am not on dating sites,” she continues. “[But] I would be open to a relationship.” Realistically, though, she says she will probably wait until her kids are older. “Right now my kids are such a wonderful age. They want to hang out with me. My understanding is that that’s going to change. When it does, it would be a great time for me to date somebody. So if anybody knows anybody who’s perfect, who could be my Harlequin lover... [She is referring to the Harlequin romance series.] No one lives up to those Harlequin men. Men should read them and take some tips.”

The most important qualities in a potential partner are “honesty, laughter, kindness”. And it goes without saying that if she ever married, she would never take their name. “Never in a million years. Why couldn’t they take mine? I have a great name.” ■