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Meet Kimbal, Elon's little bro

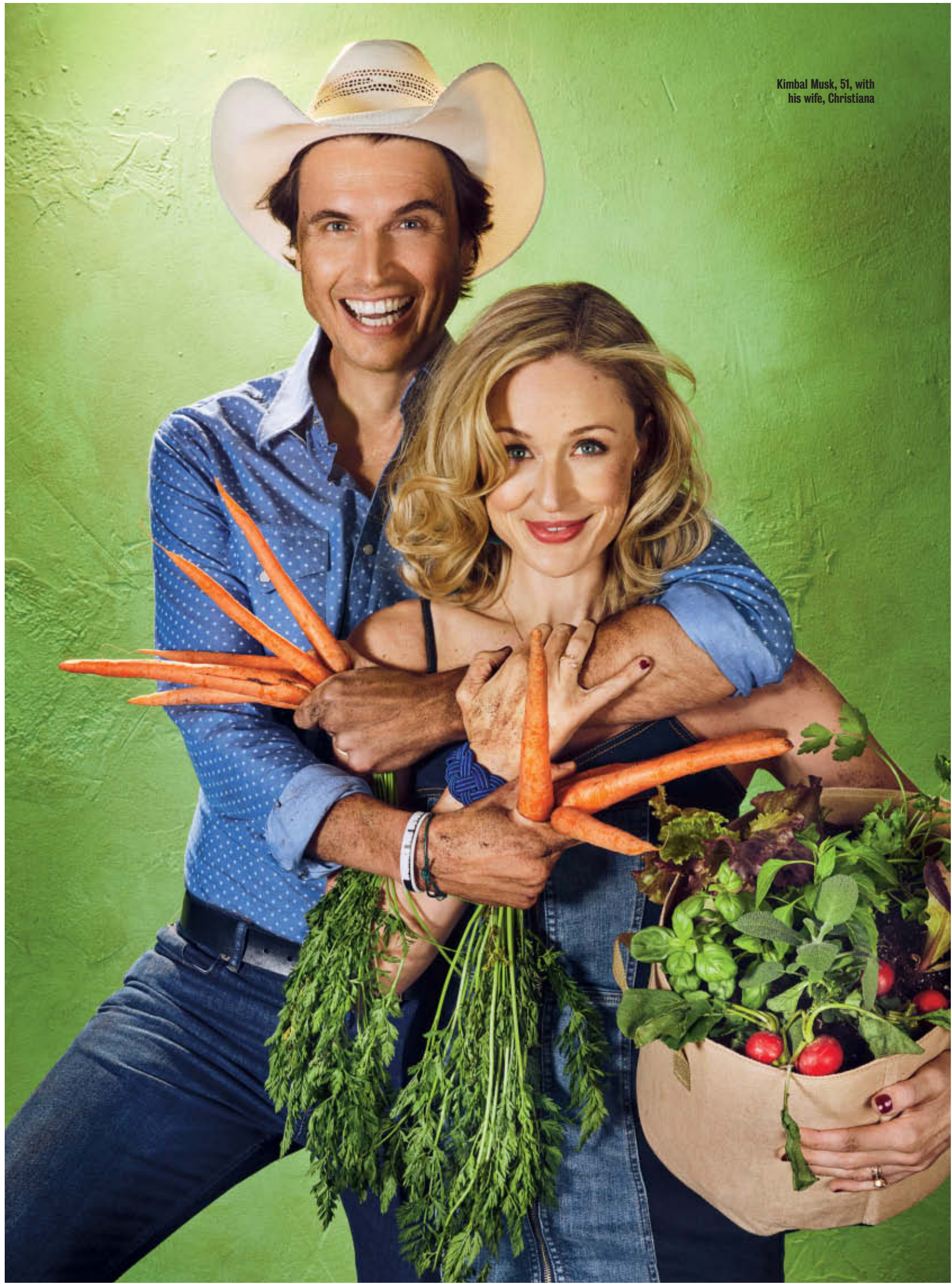
Kimbal Musk on his wedding day in 2018 with, from left, his brother, Elon, mother, Maye, and sister, Tosca



'ELON AND I USED TO HAVE FISTFIGHTS. NOW WE JUST ARGUE'

Kimbal Musk helped get his brother's business career rolling and remains his closest confidant. He also runs his own successful restaurant chain. So what is it like growing up with the world's richest man? Helena de Bertodano meets Kimbal and his wife in the Cotswolds

Kimbal Musk, 51, with his wife, Christiana



Fights between the two Musk brothers are legendary. Once Kimbal bit Elon's fist – which was poised to punch him – so hard that he had to be rushed to hospital, where he had stitches and a tetanus shot. “We grew up in South Africa, which was a very violent place,” Kimbal explains when I meet him and his wife, Christiana. “We literally used to get into fistfights... He and I have very different ideas on how to build a business.”

Now the fights rarely turn physical. But on they rage. A couple of months ago they had a fight that lasted days. What were they arguing about? “Tesla,” Kimbal says, referring to his older brother's hugely successful automotive company. (Kimbal sits on its board.) “This is a bit nuts and bolts-y – excuse the pun – but we actually had a debate about manufacturing and how we get the costs down. And we just fundamentally disagreed on how to do that. We had a conversation and it was very heated. At one in the morning I had something more to say so I thought, ‘I'm just going to call him.’”

Did Elon pick up the phone? “Yes,” Kimbal says. Christiana chuckles as she paraphrases what she could hear of the conversation: “‘You don't know what you're talking about!’ Name-calling. There's nothing that's below the belt.”

Kimbal, 51, agrees. “At least we don't physically fight these days. That was back when we worked in the same office... It's a vigorous debate.”

So who won that battle? “He took a lot of my points but it's not a winning thing. It's not a compromise either. It was more like we integrated the conversation and by the end we could grasp what we should do now.”

Their relationship is actually incredibly close. “We might be angry as heck in the moment, and then five minutes later we want to watch a movie together.”

Christiana explains, “Kimbal challenges Elon and disagrees with him more than anyone, but in a container of, ‘I love you, you're my brother. But I don't agree with you...’ They have different world views but at the end of the day they are both just giggling children. They have the most insane laughter attacks with each other.”

Elon Musk, CEO of space exploration company SpaceX as well as Tesla, may be the richest man in the world – and arguably one of the most powerful and polarising – but Kimbal is the power behind the throne, the person closest to Elon, who keeps him (more or less) tethered to the ground, ready to call him out when he starts spinning out of control. He reprimands Elon for his more outrageous tweets and once told



Elon, Christiana and Kimbal in Los Angeles, 2017



Kimbal, Maye and Elon in Toronto, 1992



The brothers celebrate the launch of a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket, 2020



The brothers in childhood



The Musk siblings with their mother

‘WE CAN BE ANGRY ONE MOMENT, THEN WATCH A MOVIE TOGETHER’

him that his acquisition of Twitter was “a pimple on the ass of what should be your impact on the world”.

In 1995 the brothers established their first successful business, Zip2, an internet city guide marketed to newspapers, which they sold for \$307 million just four years later, making them both multimillionaires in their twenties. “I never expected that kind of success,” Kimbal says, sounding surprised even today. But while Elon moved on to astronautics, founding SpaceX, Kimbal moved to New York to train as a chef, subsequently setting up the Kitchen Restaurant Group, a collection of restaurants in Colorado, Illinois and (later this year) Texas.

Trying to meet up with Kimbal is, frankly, like trying to nail jelly to the wall. I'm not sure how much this is

down to him personally. Suffice it to say that a trip to Boulder, his home town in Colorado, proves fruitless, although I do have two good meals at the Kitchen, his flagship restaurant; he has just published its recipes in *The Kitchen Cookbook*. The urfa carrots with whipped feta were particularly good. So not a completely wasted trip. But the man himself remained elusive. After a few more thwarted plans we eventually coincide in the Cotswolds, where he and Christiana are attending a food conference hosted by the Unreasonable Group, its mission being to “repurpose capitalism”.

Even this meeting is not confirmed until a few hours before and I am unsure if it will actually happen. But as I walk into the venue on a luxury estate, I see the cowboy hat – Kimbal's trademark

– looming above all the other heads in the room. Kimbal, who is 6ft 5in, could not be more welcoming, bounding over and greeting me, joking that he hadn't realised how far we now are from London, where we had been due to meet the previous day. “If you're American, England feels like a Robin Hood movie. All the little winding roads. Like, isn't everything right next door to each other?”

Charismatic and open, he comes across as a thoroughly decent man. There are country-singer vibes, although perhaps that's just the hat and jeans. He and Christiana sit side by side, finishing each other's sentences and affectionately reaching out to one another as they talk. When I play back the recording of our meeting, I am struck by how much laughter there is.

There is a mini heatwave in England and we sit outside, overlooking the rolling countryside and villages dotted over the hills. Kimbal goes to find someone to bring us cappuccinos while

Christiana explains that the name of the Unreasonable Group, which she chairs, comes from the George Bernard Shaw quote: “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” Or woman, clarifies Christiana, who grew up in Texas, the daughter of multimillionaire Sam Wyly. “The idea behind it is that to make great change in this world we must be a bit unreasonable.”

This sounds like a Musk sort of endeavour. Kimbal is attending the conference as a mentor and lots of earnest groups – with titles like “Circle of Genius” – sit in huddles planning the future of the world. Participants, including the Musks, are staying in cottages around the property. Before returning to the States, they are flying to Italy to go hiking in the Dolomites. “To celebrate our anniversary,” Christiana says. “One of our many anniversaries.”

She is referring to the fact that they had four separate weddings in 2018. Elon was best man at three of them (no guests were present at the fourth). Did he embarrass you with his best man's speech? “It was beautiful actually,” Kimbal says. “Very intentional.” Christiana elaborates, “All three he came in at the very last second, when we didn't think he was going to make it. You know how everyone [at weddings] reads Kahlil Gibran's *On Marriage or On Love*? Well, Elon read *On Pain*. And then looked us in the eye. And it was like, ‘Wow, it's really powerful actually.’ He and Kimbal joke that I can handle this family because I have a high pain threshold.”

So he was warning you? “I don't know if he was warning her,” Kimbal says. “More like recognising that she can handle it.”

“The rest of the family members are single,” Christiana points out, implying that becoming part of the Musk brood is not for the faint of heart. Later, when

Kimbal has stepped away, she tells me that when people hear her surname, they often ask if she is related to Elon. “I’m like, ‘Yes.’ And they say, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’”

For both Kimbal and Christiana, this is a second marriage. Does it help that they’ve both been married before? “100 per cent,” says Christiana, who was previously married to the British rock musician Deborah Anne Dyer, known as Skin. “I learnt so many lessons of what I could have done better in my first marriage. I didn’t know that there’s a time of the day you should stop working. Now, before Kimbal comes home each day, I take a shower, light a candle, am ready to switch gears.”

Kimbal nods. “My first wife, Jen, was wonderful. I couldn’t have had a better first marriage, but it also wasn’t compatible.”

He met Christiana in 2011 at a friend’s house. “We immediately connected, but she was engaged to be married and I was going through a divorce myself. So it wasn’t romantic.”

Four years later, they found themselves at a conference together. By then Kimbal was divorced and Christiana had been separated for three months. “He kept calling me and left me 11 voicemails.”

“I might have gone a bit overboard,” Kimbal says.

“I was like, ‘Wow, this guy really likes me.’ Finally I called him back and he said, ‘Can I take you on a date?’ And I said, ‘I have my daughter. You could bring your kids and we can hang out as friends.’ He said, ‘I have enough friends. I’m very busy but I will cancel all my plans to take you on a date.’ I said, ‘I’m kind of seeing a guy but not really, but I don’t feel comfortable seeing another guy.’ And he was like, ‘That sounds like it’s not going to work out. So when it’s done, call me.’”

Three months later, Christiana texted him. “I said, ‘Do you still want to come visit me?’ And he called immediately.” She looks at Kimbal. “And you said, ‘I’m only coming if it’s a date.’ And I was like, ‘It’s a date.’ And he’s like, ‘I really like you.’”

They agreed to go hiking. “I wanted to get to know her romantically but I didn’t want to confuse it with an evening date. So we went on a beautiful three-hour hike in Aspen.”

They moved in together but something stopped Kimbal from proposing. Until one night in a New York hotel he popped an Ambien – a sleeping sedative – without Christiana’s knowledge and asked her to marry him. “Man, Ambien is such a dangerous medicine,” Kimbal says, laughing. “I was very anxious about proposing so I wasn’t allowing myself in my conscious state to go there, but in a subconscious way, in a very outspoken way, I asked her to marry me.

I described the church, her wedding dress.”

“He didn’t give me a chance to say yes,” Christiana says. “It was more like, ‘This is the plan for the wedding.’”

The next morning, Kimbal had no recollection of what had transpired. They flew to a meeting in Kentucky and Christiana was seething. “I put something really passive-aggressive on my name badge like ‘random girl!’”

Kimbal laughs. “I said, ‘What is your problem?’”

“Finally we got back to Boulder,” Christiana says. “We take a bath together before bed every night. We were in the bath and I was so exhausted because we’d only had four hours of sleep. And he said, ‘What happened last night?’ I said [she puts on a small whimper voice], ‘You said you’d marry me.’”

She told him everything he had said about the dress and the church. “And he said, ‘All of that is exactly how I envisioned it.’”

They now live in Boulder with their four children, aged between 21 and 11 (Christiana has a daughter, Viola, and Kimbal has three children, Luca, August and Stella). Their home, a large contemporary farmhouse, is a meeting point for the whole Musk family. “Kimbal’s fantastic,” says Tosca, his younger sister, a film-maker. “We don’t have that much time together as a family but at Kimbal’s place we hike up mountains, Kimbal cooks dinner and we all hang out round the table and laugh.”

In the past, Kimbal would often go to Los Angeles to stay with Elon, but in 2020 Elon began selling all his properties. “He became homeless for a chapter,” Christiana explains. Elon now

‘ELON DOESN’T THINK ABOUT MEALS. THERE’S A LOT OF CHAOS’

lives at Starbase, an industrial complex in Texas that houses the SpaceX rockets. “He has a tiny 1,000sq ft house with bunk beds,” Kimbal says.

“We stay in an Airstream [when we visit],” Christiana says. “We still managed to throw a 50th birthday for him at Starbase, campout-style, but it’s harder now. He’s different. Elon doesn’t think about food or meals. There’s a lot of chaos. Kimbal loves to nourish him and makes him three meals a day and provides a calming, loving environment.”

“I don’t even know how he eats [when I’m not there],” Kimbal muses.

Christiana interjects, “There are cafés and catering for the engineers, and I think...”

Kimbal nods. “That’s probably how he eats.”



Kimbal with his mother, 2017. Right: Kimbal credits Jamie Oliver for motivating his philanthropic activities

Born in South Africa, Kimbal grew up in Johannesburg in an unhappy household. His mother, Maye, a model to this day, suffered physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband, Errol, who was a Jekyll and Hyde character, occasionally showering the children with love but more often berating and verbally abusing them. When Maye said she was divorcing 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 front of the children. “Tosca and Kimbal, who were two and four respectively, would cry in the corner, and Elon, who was five, would hit [Errol] on the backs of his knees to try to stop him.”

It is one subject that Kimbal finds hard to discuss today. “I learnt what not to do, not just as a father but in many ways. Which is very valuable.” He hasn’t seen his father for years. “He used to come and stay with us,” Christiana says, “and Kimbal would leave town.” Why would he even have his father to stay? “I didn’t know how to say ‘no’ in those days,” Kimbal says. “Now it’s just, ‘No.’” His earliest memories are of making mischief with his brother. “I remember getting caught lighting a fire in the back of our house when we were about four and five. We were probably going to burn something down.”

The environment was rough, even outside the house. “The value of human life in South Africa is almost zero.” He remembers feeling helpless when his



‘I LEARNT FROM JAMIE OLIVER. HE’S A HUGE INSPIRATION’

brother was severely beaten up at school. “He had obviously upset them in some form, but nothing that would justify beating someone to death, which is what they were trying to do. I was just there. There was nothing I could do.”

Once, on a train with Elon, a man in front of them was stabbed in the head as they tried to exit the carriage. “And he just died right there. A big pool of blood was forming in front of me. And everyone on the train was trying to get out. So I just had to step in this pool of blood. I still remember the stickiness of it [as I walked].”

He remembers travelling with Elon to Greece when they were young teenagers. “We grew up in a very conservative religious country and all of a sudden we were in Greece and the girls didn’t have their tops on. We were in heaven. We played chess by the side of a pool on a fixed table made out of marble and just stayed there for hours and hours and hours [watching the girls].”

Kimbal started cooking as a child because his mother was a terrible cook. “She’s my inspiration. She’d do boiled squash with no seasoning and no oil. And bean soup for every meal. A child’s nightmare.” He mimes putting a gun to his head: “‘Kill me now.’ So I was like, ‘Please let me cook.’ When I was 11, I went to a butcher who gave me a chicken and said put it in a hot oven for a solid hour. So I did and it was great. I was like, ‘Wow, this is the easiest thing in the world.’”

His ambition, however, was to be a banker. “I grew up in the Eighties wanting to work on Wall Street. I read *Liar’s Poker* [by Michael Lewis] and it seemed really exciting. So I went to business school in Canada and got a summer job on Toronto’s version of Wall Street. When

I got there I was shocked. It was not just boring; it was literally just about money. If I look back on my life, I’m really grateful for that job, because it taught me what I absolutely didn’t want to do.”

Deciding that he was never going to work for anyone again, he set up a painting company before joining forces with his brother to create Zip2. The money made, he couldn’t understand why he wasn’t happy. “I realised I was actually quite unhappy, which is why I went to cooking school.”

He enrolled in the French Culinary Institute in New York, graduating just before 9/11. Learning that the city was seeking volunteer chefs to cook for the

around the world. So while his brother beavers away trying to send humans to Mars, Kimbal is lighting the skies.

There’s a sort of focused intensity to Kimbal, who never does anything by halves either professionally or personally. “He has an incredible positivity,” Tosca says. Christiana describes how she encouraged him to start working out. “When I first started dating him he was like, ‘I can’t exercise, my knees hurt.’ I was like, ‘You’re 41. So you’re just throwing in the towel? For ever?’ It started out with just the occasional hike and now it’s five times a week full fitness training. I can’t keep up with him. Same with meditation. I was always trying to get him to meditate and now he wants to do it every day at 5pm.”

One of the things that bonded them as a couple, Christiana says, was her own brush with death. “When I was six, I was molested and terrorised by a caregiver, which led to emotional challenges in my teenage years. I spent [two years] in a mental hospital and had a long chapter, about ten years, of self-harming.” She turns over both her arms to show me a shocking number of overlapping scars. “The near-death experience was actually a suicide attempt where I was found dead and then resuscitated.”

“I learnt all this on our first couple of dates,” Kimbal says.

“On our first hike,” Christiana says, “he said, ‘Right, I’ve got to do the crazy check.’ I was like, ‘I’m ready. What’s the crazy check?’ He said, ‘Are you crazy?’ I said, ‘No, but I used to be.’ And I told him how I got through what happened and cultivated resilience and created a life on the other side of crazy.”

“What a powerful answer,” Kimbal says, stroking her arm.

“Then it was funny,” Christiana adds, “because he said, ‘I think I might be a little crazy and I might need your help.’”

What did he mean? “Well, I’m definitely not a normal person,” Kimbal answers. “I guess I don’t know what ‘normal’ is. I have an insatiable drive. I don’t like to sit still. There’s something about me, call it crazy, call it whatever, but it’s also a gift. It keeps me going.”

It is clearly a trait that runs through the Musk siblings. Tosca, whom I have met twice, is like Kimbal, very engaging and driven. “They’re a family of scattered workaholics,” Christiana says. “All three are incredibly resilient.”

The charisma gene may be somewhat diluted in Elon, but Christiana describes the two brothers almost like symbiotic twins. “They regulate each other’s nervous systems... When I first saw their dynamic together, I thought they were puzzle pieces that fit together. Now I realise that they literally complete each other.” ■