

## "I Was a Starter Wife": Inside America's Messiest Divorce

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In the late spring of 2008, my wealthy entrepreneurial husband, Elon Musk, the father of my five young sons, filed for divorce. Six weeks later, he texted me to say he was engaged to a gorgeous British actress in her early 20s who had moved to Los Angeles to be with him. Her name is Talulah Riley, and she played one of the sisters in 2005's *Pride and Prejudice*. Two of the things that struck me were: a) *Pride and Prejudice* is a really good movie, and b) My life with this man had devolved to a cliché.

At least she wasn't blonde. I found that refreshing.

When I first met Elon, I wasn't blonde, either. I was an aspiring writer in my first year at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada, sprung from a small hometown and recovering from a difficult case of first love with the older man I'd left behind. I liked older. I liked *poetic* and *rebellious* and *tortured*. I liked a guy who parked his motorcycle beneath my dorm-room window and called my name through the twilight: Romeo in a dark-brown leather jacket.

Elon wasn't like that. A fellow student a year ahead of me, he was a clean-cut, upper-class boy with a South African accent who appeared in front of me one afternoon as I was leaping up the steps to my dorm. He said we'd met at a party I knew I hadn't been to. (Years later, he would confess that he had noticed me from across the common room and decided he wanted to meet me.) He invited me out for ice cream. I said yes, but then blew him off with a note on my dorm-room door. Several hours later, my head bent over my Spanish text in an overheated room in the student center, I heard a polite cough behind me. Elon was smiling awkwardly, two chocolate-chip ice cream cones dripping down his hands. He's not a man who takes no for an answer.

He was a scientific type, at home with numbers, commerce, and logic. I was not the only woman he pursued, but even after he transferred to Wharton he kept sending roses. When he'd return to Queen's to visit friends, I found myself agreeing to have dinner with him. Once, in the bookstore together, I pointed to a shelf and said, "One day I want my own books to go right there." I had said this before to a girlfriend, who laughed and spun on her heel. But Elon not only took me seriously, he seemed impressed. It was the first time that a boy found my sense of ambition — instead of my long hair or narrow waist — attractive. Previous boyfriends complained that I was "competitive," but Elon said I had "a fire in my soul." When he told me, "I see myself in you," I knew what he meant.

After I graduated, I taught ESL in Japan for a year — Elon and I had by then gone our separate ways. Back in Canada I took a bartending job, worked on my novel, and debated whether to go back to Japan or to grad school. One night I heard myself tell my sister, "If Elon ever calls me again, I think I'll go for it. I might have missed something there." He called me one week later.

After graduation, he'd moved to Silicon Valley. He was sharing an apartment in Mountain View with three roommates and building his first dot-com company, Zip2. I soon flew out for the first of many visits. One

night, over dinner, he asked me how many kids I wanted to have. "One or two," I said immediately, "although if I could afford nannies, I'd like to have four."

He laughed. "That's the difference between you and me," he said. "I just assume that there will be nannies." He made a rocking motion with his arms and said, happily, "Baby."

Then he took me to a bookstore and handed me his credit card. "Buy as many books as you want," he said. No man could have said anything sweeter.

Two years later — two months before our January 2000 wedding — Elon told me we had an appointment with a lawyer who was going to help us with a "financial agreement" that the board of his new company wanted us to sign. When I looked at him, he said quickly, "It's not a prenup."

Although I'd been dating a struggling 20-something entrepreneur, I was now engaged to a wealthy one. Elon had sold Zip2, which partnered with newspapers to help them get online, in 1999, the year before, and was worth about \$20 million overnight. He bought and renovated an 1,800-square-foot condo: We now had a place of our own. He also bought a million-dollar sports car — a McLaren F1 — and a small plane. Our day-to-day routine remained the same (except for the addition of flying lessons), and Elon's wealth seemed abstract and unreal, a string of zeros that existed in some strange space of its own. I made uneasy jokes that he was about to dump me for a supermodel. Instead, he proposed, getting down on bended knee on a street corner.

Most of his newfound fortune he rolled over into his second company, an online banking institution, [X.com](#) (opens in new tab), that later became PayPal (the online payment company). It was this board that was supposedly urging him to get a "financial agreement." What I didn't understand at the time was that Elon was actually ushering me into a period of "mediation," which, I now know, means anything done or spoken is confidential and cannot be used in a court of law. But I had no time to research mediation, or learn that it rarely serves the interest of the less powerful person in the relationship. Years later, I came to learn these things. But two months after our wedding, I simply signed the postnuptial agreement. I trusted my husband — why else had I married him? — and I told myself it didn't matter. We were soul mates. We would never get divorced. A life without Elon was unthinkable, something I'd realized a few months before he proposed, as we napped together one spring afternoon before a friend's wedding. With my arm slung across his chest, I felt that he was my own private Alexander the Great.

Still, there were warning signs. As we danced at our wedding reception, Elon told me, "I am the alpha in this relationship." I shrugged it off, just as I would later shrug off signing the postnuptial agreement, but as time went on, I learned that he was serious. He had grown up in the male-dominated culture of South Africa, and the will to compete and dominate that made him so successful in business did not magically shut off when he came home. This, and the vast economic imbalance between us, meant that in the months following our wedding, a certain dynamic began to take hold. Elon's judgment overruled mine, and he was constantly remarking on the ways he found me lacking. "I am your wife," I told him repeatedly, "not your employee."

"If you were my employee," he said just as often, "I would fire you."

By the time eBay bought PayPal in 2002, we had moved to Los Angeles and had our first child, a boy named Nevada Alexander. The sale of PayPal vaulted Elon's net worth to well over \$100 million. The

same week, Nevada went down for a nap, placed on his back as always, and stopped breathing. He was 10 weeks old, the age when male infants are most susceptible to SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). By the time the paramedics resuscitated him, he had been deprived of oxygen for so long that he was brain-dead. He spent three days on life support in a hospital in Orange County before we made the decision to take him off it. I held him in my arms when he died.

Elon made it clear that he did not want to talk about Nevada's death. I didn't understand this, just as he didn't understand why I grieved openly, which he regarded as "emotionally manipulative." I buried my feelings instead, coping with Nevada's death by making my first visit to an IVF clinic less than two months later. Elon and I planned to get pregnant again as swiftly as possible. Within the next five years, I gave birth to twins, then triplets, and I sold three novels to Penguin and Simon & Schuster. Even so, Nevada's death sent me on a years-long inward spiral of depression and distraction that would be continuing today if one of our nannies hadn't noticed me struggling. She approached me with the name of an excellent therapist. Dubious, I gave it a shot. In those weekly sessions, I began to get perspective on what had become my life.

We were breathing rarefied air. The first crowded apartment we'd shared in Mountain View seemed like ancient history from our 6,000-square-foot house in the Bel Air hills. Married for seven years, we had a domestic staff of five; during the day our home transformed into a workplace. We went to black-tie fundraisers and got the best tables at elite Hollywood nightclubs, with Paris Hilton and Leonardo DiCaprio partying next to us. When Google cofounder Larry Page got married on Richard Branson's private Caribbean island, we were there, hanging out in a villa with John Cusack and watching Bono pose with swarms of adoring women outside the reception tent. When we traveled, we drove onto the airfield up to Elon's private jet, where a private flight attendant handed us champagne. I spent an afternoon walking around San Jose with Daryl Hannah, where she caused a commotion at Starbucks when the barista asked her name and she said, blithely, "Daryl."

It was a dream lifestyle, privileged and surreal. But the whirlwind of glitter couldn't disguise a growing void at the core. Elon was obsessed with his work: When he was home, his mind was elsewhere. I longed for deep and heartfelt conversations, for intimacy and empathy. And while I sacrificed a normal family life for his career, Elon started to say that I "read too much," shrugging off my book deadlines. This felt like a dismissal, and a stark reversal from the days when he was so supportive. When we argued — over the house or the kids' sleeping schedule — my faults and flaws came under the microscope. I felt insignificant in his eyes, and I began thinking about what effect our dynamic would have on our five young sons.

In the spring of 2008, eight years after our wedding, a car accident served as my wake-up call. The moment of impact seemed suspended in time: The details of the other driver's face, looking at me in horror as she held a cell phone to her ear, were so clear it was like the distance between us didn't exist. There was a crunch of metal as her car plowed into mine, and when we skidded to a halt, my first thought wasn't, Thank God nobody's hurt. It was, My husband is going to kill me. And in my mind's eye, I could suddenly see myself: a woman who'd gotten very thin, and very blonde, stumbling out of a very expensive car with the front-left wheel smashed in.

I barely recognized myself. I had turned into a trophy wife — and I sucked at it. I wasn't detail-oriented enough to maintain a perfect house or be a perfect hostess. I could no longer hide my boredom when the

men talked and the women smiled and listened. I wasn't interested in Botox or makeup or reducing the appearance of the scars from my C-sections. And no matter how many highlights I got, Elon pushed me to be blonder. "Go platinum," he kept saying, and I kept refusing.

Not long after the accident, I sat on our bed with my knees pulled up to my chest and tears in my eyes. I told Elon, in a soft voice that was nonetheless filled with conviction, that I needed our life to change. I didn't want to be a sideline player in the multimillion-dollar spectacle of my husband's life. I wanted equality. I wanted partnership. I wanted to love and be loved, the way we had before he made all his millions.

Elon agreed to enter counseling, but he was running two companies and carrying a planet of stress. One month and three sessions later, he gave me an ultimatum: Either we fix this marriage today or I will divorce you tomorrow, by which I understood he meant, Our status quo works for me, so it should work for you. He filed for divorce the next morning. I felt numb, but strangely relieved.

Eight years after I signed the postnup, I began to understand just what I'd done. I had effectively signed away all my rights as a married person, including any claim to community property except our house, which was to be vested in my name once we had a child. But my lawyer is presenting a legal theory that could render the postnup invalid. A postnup, unlike a prenup, requires a complete financial disclosure because of something called "marital fiduciary duty": the obligation of one spouse to be honest and straightforward in financial dealings with the other. Around the time we signed the agreement, Elon was involved in a significant merger between [X.com](#) (opens in new tab) and a company called Confinity. Together, the two became PayPal and raised the value of Elon's [X.com](#) (opens in new tab) stock by millions of dollars more than what he reported on the postnup. Whether this was deliberate or an oversight, according to my lawyer, it could render the contract fraudulent, and thus invalid — if it weren't for the protection of mediation confidentiality. That period ended not when we left the lawyer's office or when we got married, but only once we'd signed. The question that will determine the outcome of our divorce case, which has been winding its way through the California legal system for more than two years, is a legal one: Should mediation confidentiality trump marital fiduciary duty, or vice versa? Two years after our separation, we ended up in court. The judge ruled in Elon's favor, but stressed that the case was "a long cause matter" and immediately certified it for appeal. Resolution is at least a year away.

In the months after our separation, I dyed my hair dark and cut it. I also developed a friendship that gradually deepened into romance with a man I'd known casually for years. One night he took me to a reading of Eve Ensler's new play. "This is power-woman central," he said, as we watched Arianna Huffington hold court in the front row. As he pointed out other prominent women in the audience, I realized the kind of social world I'd been living in: The females who populated it were the young wives and girlfriends of wealthy men, or the personal assistants who catered to them. Women disappeared after some point in their 30s, and any female ambition other than looking beautiful, shopping, and overseeing the domestic realm became an inconvenience. Being in that audience, watching that staged reading, I felt myself reclaim the freedom to write my own life.

Although I am estranged from Elon — when it comes to the children, I deal with his assistant — I don't regret my marriage. I've worked through some anger, both at Elon for rendering me so disposable, and at myself for buying into a fairy tale when I should have known better. But I will always respect the brilliant and visionary person that he is. I also can't regret the divorce (our case was bifurcated, which means that

even though the property issues aren't settled, our marriage is legally dead). Elon and I share custody of the children, who are thriving. I feel grounded now, and deeply grateful for my life.

And something unexpected happened: Throughout the divorce proceedings, his fiancée and I discovered we liked each other. People were puzzled that I didn't want to poke chopsticks in her eyeballs. "It's kind of like a French movie," observed a friend, and I sent Talulah an e-mail:

*I would rather live out the French-movie version of things, in which the two women become friends and various philosophies are pondered, than the American version, in which one is "good" and one is "bad" and there's a huge catfight sequence and someone gets thrown off a balcony.*

She responded, *Let's do as the French do.*

She is, by all accounts, a lovely, bright, and very young person, and better fitted to my ex-husband's lifestyle and personality than I ever was. Although she had dark hair when she and Elon first met, she is now blonder than I've ever been.