

DO YOU THINK I'M INSANE?"

This question came from Elon Musk near the very end of a long dinner we shared at a high-end seafood restaurant in Silicon Valley. I'd gotten to the restaurant first and settled down with a gin and tonic, knowing Musk would—as ever—be late. After about fifteen minutes, Musk showed up wearing leather shoes, designer jeans, and a plaid dress shirt. Musk stands six foot one but ask anyone who knows him and they'll confirm that he seems much bigger than that. He's absurdly broad-shouldered, sturdy, and thick. You'd figure he would use this frame to his advantage and perform an alpha-male strut when entering a room. Instead, he tends to be almost sheepish. It's head tilted slightly down while walking, a quick handshake hello after reaching the table, and then butt in seat. From there, Musk needs a few minutes before he warms up and looks at ease. Musk asked me to dinner for a negotiation of sorts. Eighteen months earlier, I'd informed him of my plans to write a book about him, and he'd informed me of his plans not to cooperate. His rejection stung but thrust me into dogged reporter mode. If I had to do this book without him, so be it. Plenty of people had left Musk's companies, Tesla Motors and SpaceX, and would talk, and I already knew a lot of his friends. The interviews followed one after another, month after month, and two hundred or so people into the process, I heard from Musk once again. He called me at home and declared that things could go one of two ways: he could make my life very difficult or he could help with the project after all. He'd be willing to cooperate if he could read the book before it went to publication, and could add footnotes throughout it. He would not meddle with my text, but he wanted the chance to set the record straight in spots that he deemed factually inaccurate. I understood where this was coming from. Musk wanted a measure of control over his life's story. He's also wired like a scientist and suffers mental anguish at the sight of a factual error. A mistake on a printed page would gnaw at his soul—forever. While I could understand his perspective, I could not let him read the book, for professional, personal, and practical reasons. Musk has his version of the truth, and it's not always the version of the truth that the rest of the world shares. He's prone to verbose answers to even the simplest of questions as well, and the thought of thirty-page footnotes seemed all too real. Still, we agreed to have dinner, chat all this out, and see where it left us.

Our conversation began with a discussion of public-relations people. Musk burns through PR staffers notoriously fast, and Tesla was in the process of hunting for a new communications chief. "Who is the best PR person in the world?" he asked in a very Muskian fashion. Then we talked about mutual acquaintances, Howard Hughes, and the Tesla factory. When the waiter stopped by to take our order, Musk asked for suggestions that would work with his low-carb diet. He settled on chunks of fried lobster soaked in black squid ink. The negotiation hadn't begun, and Musk was already dishing. He opened up about the major fear keeping him up at night: namely that Google's cofounder and CEO Larry Page might well have been building a fleet of artificial-intelligence-enhanced robots capable of destroying mankind. "I'm really worried about this," Musk said. It didn't make Musk feel any better that he and Page were very close friends and that he felt Page was fundamentally a well-intentioned

person and not Dr. Evil. In fact, that was sort of the problem. Page's nice-guy nature left him assuming that the machines would forever do our bidding. "I'm not as optimistic," Musk said. "He could produce something evil by accident." As the food arrived, Musk consumed it. That is, he didn't eat it as much as he made it disappear rapidly with a few gargantuan bites. Desperate to keep Musk happy and chatting, I handed him a big chunk of steak from my plate. The plan worked . . . for all of ninety seconds. Meat. Hunk. Gone.

It took awhile to get Musk off the artificial intelligence doom-and-gloom talk and to the subject at hand. Then, as we drifted toward the book, Musk started to feel me out, probing exactly why it was that I wanted to write about him and calculating my intentions. When the moment presented itself, I moved in and seized the conversation. Some adrenaline released and mixed with the gin, and I launched into what was meant to be a forty-five-minute sermon about all the reasons Musk should let me burrow deep into his life and do so while getting exactly none of the controls he wanted in return. The speech revolved around the inherent limitations of footnotes, Musk coming off like a control freak and my journalistic integrity being compromised. To my great surprise, Musk cut me off after a couple of minutes and simply said, "Okay." One thing that Musk holds in the highest regard is resolve, and he respects people who continue on after being told no. Dozens of other journalists had asked him to help with a book before, but I'd been the only annoying asshole who continued on after Musk's initial rejection, and he seemed to like that.

The dinner wound down with pleasant conversation and Musk laying waste to the low-carb diet. A waiter showed up with a giant yellow cotton candy desert sculpture, and Musk dug into it, ripping

off handfuls of the sugary fluff. It was settled. Musk granted me access to the executives at his companies, his friends, and his family. He would meet me for dinner once a month for as long as it took. For the first time, Musk would let a reporter see the inner workings of his world. Two and a half hours after we started, Musk put his hands on the table, made a move to get up, and then paused, locked eyes with me, and busted out that incredible question: “Do you think I’m insane?” The oddity of the moment left me speechless for a beat, while my every synapse fired trying to figure out if this was some sort of riddle, and, if so, how it should be answered artfully. It was only after I’d spent lots of time with Musk that I realized the question was more for him than me. Nothing I said would have mattered. Musk was stopping one last time and wondering aloud if I could be trusted and then looking into my eyes to make his judgment. A split second later, we shook hands and Musk drove off in a red Tesla Model S sedan.

ANY STUDY OF ELON MUSK must begin at the headquarters of SpaceX, in Hawthorne, California—a suburb of Los Angeles located a few miles from Los Angeles International Airport. It’s there that visitors will find two giant posters of Mars hanging side by side on the wall leading up to Musk’s cubicle. The poster to the left depicts Mars as it is today—a cold, barren red orb. The poster on the right shows a Mars with a humongous green landmass surrounded by oceans. The planet has been heated up and transformed to suit humans. Musk fully intends to try and make this happen. Turning humans into space colonizers is his stated life’s purpose. “I would like to die thinking that humanity has a bright future,” he said. “If we can solve sustainable energy and be well on our way to becoming a multiplanetary species with a self-sustaining civilization on another planet—to cope with a worst-case scenario happening and extinguishing human consciousness—then,” and here he paused for a moment, “I think that would be really good.