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” THIS
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... ”

Actor Milo Ventimiglia’s turn as Evel Knievel crash-landed with COVID-19. But like many of us, he has emerged on the other side stronger for it.

- - - Milo Ventimiglia sits on an idling motorcycle with a shaggy mop of hair draped over his forehead. This is almost 20 years ago. He’s 27 but playing 19, looking back over his shoulder at the show’s protagonist, played by Brittany Snow, as she gives a friend a tearful goodbye. Then Snow saddles the back of Ventimiglia’s bike, wraps her arms around his waist, and settles in for the 3,000-mile ride from Philadelphia to Berkeley. Off they go, helmetless, to protest the Vietnam War.

The road trip was the series-ending plot point in the family drama *American Dreams*, which aired for three seasons on NBC. In real life, Ventimiglia barely drove Snow out of frame. “I went about 10 feet,” he says. “But because I was putting her on the back, I had to have a license for insurance.” That’s how Ventimiglia became a rider.

Up to that point, he’d been on a motorcycle only one other time, a full decade earlier. As a teenager, he side-saddled a dirt bike while trying to learn motorcycle skills for a commercial audition. But the bike was too big, and the part too small. So after the machine skittered away from him and toppled over, he gave up on riding. Then came *American Dreams*, and now, fast-forward to age 44, he owns a garage full of Harley-Davidsons and rides to set on most filming days.

You might have seen Ventimiglia on his bike in Japan last year, during an episode of *Ride With Norman Reedus*. You might have seen him playing America’s favorite dad Jack Pearson on *This Is Us*, a show that’s been nominated for a Golden Globe and many Emmys, including three nominations for Ventimiglia personally as lead actor. Jack is an everyday hero with three kids, a wife played by Mandy Moore, and a slow cooker that’s on the fritz. Jack also has a following that’s arguably bigger than Ventimiglia’s.

When viewers meet the actor in person, they say things like, “I’m trying to be a father like you,” or, “I wish you were my dad.” Which is odd, because Ventimigila doesn’t have kids. “Fans want to be seen by Jack,” Ventimiglia says. “Sometimes it’s not even about me, and I’m not at all offended by that.”

Actually, he’s used to it. Ventimiglia’s characters tend to cast long shadows, and he’s managed to spend large stretches of time hidden in their shade. Whichever character dons his skin becomes instantly lovable on the strength of his deep eyes and a smile that hangs sideways like a Nike swoosh. After playing a troubled-but-sensitive love interest on *American Dreams*, he played a troubled-but-intellectual love interest on *Gilmore Girls*. And in the superhero drama *Heroes*, he was a troubled parametric with so much empathy that he could literally absorb powers from people around him.

He was Robert De Niro’s kid in *Killing Season*. Then he was Sylvester Stallone’s son in *Creed II*. And in 2019’s *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, he builds the emotional center of a buddy comedy-drama about a Formula 1 racing driver and his pet golden retriever.

In context, *This Is Us* can be seen as a progressive step for a hardworking tradesman who’s spent years honing his tools. But Ventimiglia, true to the wisp of hair that occasionally swings down to block his eyes from the spotlight, deflects all success to the show’s creators and crew. “I’m the face guy,” he says. “I’m just trying to wear the moustache the right way.”

Call it false humility, but Ventimiglia’s consistent in his good-guy schtick. So fans were thrilled in 2019 when the USA Network announced *Evel*, a series that would cast him as the anti-Jack Pearson – stunt rider Evel Knievel. “Evel was a womanizer, and he wasn’t great to his kids,” Ventimiglia says. “If I wanted to play outside of the Jack Pearson sandbox, he’s actually the furthest I can go without playing a murderer.”

Before he was jumping motorcycles, Knievel was a notorious con man and thief, and even afterward, he was prone to violence and heavy drinking. He once broke a sports writer’s arm with a baseball bat. There would be real excitement in watching the notorious *nice guy* Milo Ventimiglia – beloved son, father, and dog’s best friend – morph into a brute with a hard-on for self-destruction.

Ventimiglia wanted to go deep. He bought a 1967 Bonneville so he could practice using the old-timey right-side shifter. He enrolled in a riding camp called Wheelie

University, where he learned to negotiate the throttle and brake to find the balance point on the rear wheel of a Speed Triple. During the final weeks on set shooting *This Is Us* season four, he’d return home from each day on set to do Evel Knievel character work – perfecting the voice and mannerisms, reading and watching film to understand the daredevil’s psyche. “It was really important that I wasn’t going to be doing just an impersonation,” Ventimiglia says. “Everybody understood who Evel Knievel was, but they didn’t know enough about the guy behind the jumps.”

The shoot was to go down in Albuquerque, and Ventimiglia arrived on set in early March 2020. It was just as states across the country began reporting their first cases of COVID-19. He’d dyed his hair from Jack Pearson black to Evel Knievel blonde, and he’d sat with his makeup team until they could reliably conjure the daredevil’s face at any age. Ventimiglia was ready, physically and emotionally. Then two days before shooting began, the network hit pause. Everybody sat around, hoping this bat-virus thing would blow over. When it didn’t, a truckload of period-correct Triumphs and Harley XR750s left set and returned to Los Angeles. Days turned into weeks, then months. And Ventimiglia waited. He was stuck Albuquerque, quarantined with Knievel in his head.

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Ventimiglia was the youngest of three. Middle class. Nice family. Still, he noticed his two older sisters faced hardships that he didn’t. There was a word for that: sexism. He wanted to protect them from it. “I don’t know that I was a sensitive kid, but I think I had an understanding of what [my sisters] went through,” he says. To show his sisters he respected them, he had to show respect to all women. He was a sweet kid.

When he was 18, Ventimiglia landed one forgettable line on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. It was his first paying Hollywood gig, and after it, he began booking commercials and other small parts.

In 2002, he bought a house in west Los Angeles where he still lives today, and he built a reputation as a dependable teammate who cares more about elevating projects than standing in the spotlight. “The dirty secret is, I think Milo’s actually a better director,” says Russ Cundiff, who launched a production company with Ventimiglia in 2003, after the two met on a film set. “He knows what he wants, and he’s the guy who will roll up his sleeves and stay late.”

Ventimiglia doesn’t just play lovable – he’s real-life lovable. “I couldn’t adore him any more,” says Mandy Moore, his on-screen wife in *This Is Us*. Moore recalls the day they met, during her *This Is Us* audition. She came in knowing he was a lock for the lead role. To win the part, she’d have to gin up some chemistry. And it wouldn’t be easy. “I’m supposed to be nine months pregnant with triplets,” she says of the screen test. “He’s my husband, we love each other deeply, and it’s his birthday.”

It was an intimate scene, and the room was full of writers and directors. She was nervous. But after shaking her hand, Ventimiglia asked: “Is it okay to touch you, or kiss your cheek or neck?” The question was unexpectedly thoughtful for a casting room – especially in the era before #metoo. “I remember thinking, *Wow, what a lovely gesture*,” says Moore. “It made me feel instantly comfortable.”

Moore landed the part, of course. And when production began, Ventimiglia immediately learned the name of every cast and crew member. “He’s the guy who walks around and shakes everybody’s hand before we start work each day,” Moore says. His heart’s as big as Jack Pearson’s; he’s just a little cooler. Before Jack enters set in his dad pants and sweater vest, Milo’s in the trailer in jeans, a T-shirt, and motorcycle boots. “I’m always jealous when he shows up to work on his bike,” says Moore. “I’m like, ‘Oh, you’re gonna get home so much faster than the rest of us.’”

Ventimiglia’s first bike was a Harley, and today he owns three: a 2014 Fat Bob, 2016 Low Rider S, and 2019 Road Glide Special, all modified for more power and appeal. The Fat Bob has a big 117ci engine. The Low Rider has torque-pumping Thunderheader pipes.



STYLING BY NATALIE ANNE AND GIOILLIOSA FULLER; GROOMING BY BARBARA GUILLAUME; SET DECORATION BY CINDY EPPING

The Road Glide has a killer set of aftermarket speakers – which he rarely turns on.

The bikes get him to and from work fast, sure. But riding also provides a deeper instruction for life. Following his 10-foot jaunt on *American Dreams*, Ventimiglia spent a year sharpening his instincts through one-on-one lessons with a riding coach who put him on a stripped-down KZ1000, an old police motorcycle. He was planning for the worst. “The first thing I learned was how to dump the bike,” he says. “The trainer taught me from that point of view: You need to be so proficient that if you can’t recover from a situation, you can get away and be safe.”

Get away and be safe. That proved to be a valuable lesson when it became clear the virus wasn’t going away anytime soon.

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After COVID killed *Evel*, Ventimiglia stayed in Albuquerque for three months. Because he didn’t have a motorcycle with him – they all went back on the trailer – he spent his free time hiking and driving his truck in the desert. When he finally returned to L.A., it was just as protests over racial injustice were boiling over into riots. He hunkered down at home, and in September, *This Is Us* was greenlit to resume filming.

Ventimiglia returned to set under strict new COVID rules. He was tested three times a week and spent most of his downtime in his trailer. “It was an adjustment, because I get a lot out of interacting with my crew,” he says. But that was no longer possible.

The past year and a half gave the majority of us around the world a lot of time alone with our thoughts. Maybe too much time. And Ventimiglia was right there with us, trying to grapple with the uncertainty and unfairness of it all: “It’s difficult because you see so many people going through such a hard time. It’s not just the pandemic. People aren’t working, and they’re losing their homes.”

While *This Is Us* season four left off with Jack’s adult sons close to blows – an agonizing interpersonal drama – season five shifted the storyline toward the larger conflict of police brutality and a nation in quarantine. Living through a political upheaval in real life, Ventimiglia felt particularly impassioned. “The division between blue and red – I mean, shit. It sounds like the Crips and the Bloods. It sounds like gang stuff. It’s ridiculous. It’s like guys, first of all, we’re all American here.”

For Ventimiglia, the anger stemmed from a social revolution that exploded out of a pandemic. But it started when he was bikeless in the desert. “To be honest, deep down I was pretty fucking pissed about *Evel*,” he says. “I think I needed that time of recovery.”

After Albuquerque, Ventimiglia returned to the saddle. But something was different. For years, he only rode in full safety garb: Wesco boots, heavy denim, a full-face helmet. But after the pandemic, against his better judgment, he started cruising in sneakers and a T-shirt. He wanted to feel the wind on his skin. The man has nearly two decades of riding experience. He can hold a wheelie and drive a right-side shifter. He’s earned the right to ride how he wants.

Ventimiglia doesn’t believe *Evel* is dead. Like the daredevil it portrays, he suspects, the project will eventually pick itself up from the bottom of the jump ramp to undergo a full recovery. “I’m sure at some point, I’ll find a window to shoot and a studio will pick up on it,” he says. “It may be 2022, or it may be 2023. I really don’t know.”

For now, *Kniefel’s* motorcycles are sitting in a trailer on the Universal lot, and Ventimiglia remains focused on *This Is Us*. Due to production delays, season five will roll right into season six, the show’s final chapter, and then Ventimiglia will embark on – well, what exactly? What role does he want to play in a post-COVID world?

“It’s important to tell stories that show what’s happening in terms of social unrest, the pandemic – all that stuff,” he says. “But at the same time, we’ve got to tell stories of love, heroics, and friendship. We’ve got to tell all kinds of different stories to get people out of their world and allow them to live in a moment of peace for 30 seconds.”

What we need is to get away and be safe. And Ventimiglia wants to help. - - -





Ventimiglia's 2016 Harley-Davidson Dyna Low Rider S was built by Ray Kushner of Collective PHX in Phoenix, Arizona. "Everything's blacked out," Ventimiglia says. "Every bolt on the bike."

THE SPECS: Harley-Davidson 117ci kit with head work; Harley-Davidson Screamin' Eagle air cleaner; Rivera Primo pro-clutch; chain conversion; PM covers, pegs, and grips; Lyndall brakes; Thunderheader exhaust; Legends suspension up front; Progressive suspension in the rear; Pro One black fork tubes; Leather Pros bags; Saddlemen seat pad; FXR Division 6 Series bars; Alloy Art rear flush signals; Custom Dynamics front halo signals; Harley-Davidson headlight; Harley-Davidson flush gas caps; Dakota Digital blackout speedometer; laydown plate; and dark smoke taillight.





Milo's own "Get Off Your Phone" gloves, made by Bennie Goodson at Langlitz Leathers in Portland, Oregon. Ship John x Langlitz Leathers jacket.