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World Upside Down

By Kevin Fitton

World Upside Down

It was during our sophomore year at Michigan State when Kyleigh started calling us the Crew. Not the most original name in the world, but to us it meant something. The essence of the Crew was the Ethos—and this came from Kyleigh as well. The first part of the Ethos was about being adventurous. We were up for whatever shit was going down, and if nothing was going down, we made something happen. The second part of the Ethos was that we took care of one another, although I'll be honest in saying that Kyleigh was the one who really took care of everyone else.

By sophomore year, we had access to alcohol through Derek (a 22-year-old junior) and a party house. Kyleigh's parents are loaded, and they bought her an off-campus house, where she lived with her best friend, Sara, and a couple other girls.

Out of all of us, Kyleigh had the least at stake. Her parents had money, and I mean serious money. I think she felt guilty about that, which is at least part of the reason she did the whole thing at Shain Park. But I'll get to that in a minute. Point is, she could have coasted. My dad is an auto mechanic, and I paid for my own degree in construction management. Well, borrowed for my degree. But Kyleigh was really into her classes. Sometimes, you could tell that she was deep in thought, even while we were walking to the Quality Dairy to load up on booze. She was a sociology major, and that was a different sort of education. It was about learning to think, about understanding the world. She would go on these rants about things, about everything that was wrong with our society: structural racism, the corruption in our political system, all of the shit that women go through in our

world.

Despite everything I knew about Kyleigh, though, I was shocked when I saw her in the news.

It was two years since graduation, and we were still in touch, still hanging out. It was summer, and we spent weekends at her parents' place, lounging at the pool and drinking White Claws. They have this ridiculous set-up with two pools side by side: a four-lane lap pool and then another pool that's even bigger, curved, with a diving board on one end, and a big slide on the other (which is amazing when you're high—just saying).

There were a couple of things that seemed different about her that summer. She was running a lot for one thing. She did a 10k, was signed up for a half marathon, and was throwing around the idea of running a full. I don't know the right way of saying this without sounding like an ass, but she had always been a little bit heavier. She wasn't fat but she wasn't thin either. Big boned. That's probably the less shitty way of saying it. So I just figured the exercise thing was a gambit to lose a few pounds. And maybe it was. But she was also taking action.

And then there was what she was reading. I brought a novel to the pool with me most of the time, usually a Brad Thor thriller. She had always been into heavier stuff. I don't remember most of the authors, but I remember Roxanne Gay and some guy whose name sounded like Lip Shits. But now she was reading the Bible. Poolside. When I asked her about it, she said Jesus was the greatest moral philosopher in human history, that Gandhi and Martin Luther King were both inspired by Jesus, and maybe I should get a copy. I do have one. I just don't consider the Bible a summer beach read.

What bothered me is that she didn't tell me about it. Clearly, she had been thinking and planning. In the construction world, everything is about planning and sequencing, and so I know that things like this take time. She got a permit from the city of Birmingham, a swanky Detroit suburb where she was living with her parents, and she built the huge sign and standing board. This was something she had been thinking about, probably for months. And the whole time, not a peep, not a word. I find out when my friend forwards me an article from the Oakland Press, and I'm like, what the fuck?

I saw the article when I was at a job site. I was waiting for the electrician to show. The homeowner wanted to add a couple of outlets. I was planning on walking the electrician through the changes, but when I saw the article, I bolted. The construction site was way out in Milford, following the city's never-ending movement to the north and west, so it was a good forty minutes before I parked my truck, pulling within a foot of the Mercedes in front of me.

At first, I didn't notice anything unusual. The park was clean. White sidewalks contoured the green grass. The grass was lush, carefully trimmed, the strange mixture of natural and unnatural in a perfect lawn. The bandstand was empty, the park benches full.

Kyleigh was in front of the Freedom Sculpture. There was a small crowd gathered around her, but I could still see her. She was standing on her head on one of those blue wrestling mats. Her body leaned against the standing board, her arms braced like trusses.

I lingered in the back of the crowd. I knew from the article that she was standing on her head for five minutes out of every hour, and she was going for

twelve hours every day. From eight to eight. For a couple of days, she left her standing board up overnight, but kids vandalized it, leaving her spray-painted messages: *Blow Me* (written upside down, which was kind of funny) and other vulgarities, so she started bringing it home every night and setting it back up every morning.

The standing board was eight feet by eight feet, two sheets of plywood painted black and supported by some two-by-fours on the reverse. It was positioned in front of the Freedom Sculpture at the center of the park, but it only covered the bottom of the towering sculpture: two bronzed figures, male and female, flying away. She would tell me later that it was intentional, juxtaposing herself against the sculpture. While the two figures reached for the sky, backs arched, as if they were about to take flight, she was stuck to the ground, gravitationally fixed to this planet and its set of problems.

There was also a sign in front of the standing board. At the top, it said, “World Upside Down.” Below was a chalkboard where people were writing things that they wished were different about the world, and unlike the vandals, people were taking this seriously. That first day I arrived on the scene it was eleven in the morning, and it was already covered with words and phrases: “people starving, war, living wage, racism, distorted food system, bad teachers.” I loved the last one. I imagined some pissed-off third grader letting it rip.

Someone was counting down the time. Ninety seconds. Sixty seconds. I moved closer, and it’s the weirdest thing, but when a person is upside down, you can’t read their eyes. I didn’t know if she saw me until she was upright. She got down from her standing board with a flip, stood up, and this guy who was

counting her down held her shoulder while she steadied herself.

There was a line of admirers, and she dealt with each one while I waited on the side. It was twenty minutes before I got her attention.

“Wow,” I said. I’ll admit, it was a little sarcastic.

“See? That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“All that time, sitting at the pool, and not a word.”

While we were arguing, Shoulder-boy was still hanging around. He was behind the standing board but visible, like a kid who’s terrible at hide-and-seek. He was one of those guys with long hair who’s chronically tucking it behind their ears.

Kyleigh took a breath. “I didn’t tell you, because I didn’t want you to talk me out of it.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because I know you.”

“Well,” I said. “Maybe you don’t.”

There was this thing that happened senior year, a couple of months before graduation, and it was still hovering over our relationship. It was like when moisture gets between two panes of glass and there’s no way to get it clean.

It had been brewing for a while, at least for me. The more I got to know Kyleigh, the more attractive she became. She was pretty. And smart. And kind. If you needed help with something, or if you were having a hard time, she was the first person you called. And I know that kindness might not sound like the sexiest thing in the world, but it kind of is.

The thing is, I didn't know how to tell her. With friends, the stakes are higher, and I just kept putting it off, until one night when we were both drunk. The sad part is, even then, I didn't really say anything. I didn't declare myself. We were sitting next to one another on this old sagging couch, and we were basically falling into one another, hip to hip, laughing, and drinking. It was a warm day, and the crowded house kept getting hotter and hotter. Finally, I took her hand, and we walked to the porch. She hopped onto the railing, so we were face-to-face, and I leaned in and kissed her.

In the morning, I was hung over. My head ached. But that was nothing compared with the awkwardness. Kyleigh was embarrassed. She got dressed under the covers. She barely said a word.

Walking home, I started getting angry. I would have understood if she would have said, "Hey, that was great, but I just want to be friends." But she was acting like it was the biggest mistake in the world—like *I* was the biggest mistake in the world.

I don't know why my reaction to her is to get angry, but with Kyleigh, that's where I go. So when I left Shain Park, I was pissed. I was mad that she didn't tell me what she was planning and mad that she was right—I would have tried talking her out of it. And if I'm really going to bare my soul here, the truth is I was jealous—jealous of Shoulder-boy and everyone else who was receiving her attention. And I was mad at myself for being jealous.

The whole thing started really taking off the day I came to see her. Later, a TV news crew came and interviewed her. They showed some video of her

standing on her head and did a conversation piece.

She was articulate. She said that what she was trying to do was to get people think about their lives. “More than anything else, World Upside Down is about getting people’s attention,” she said. “I want to shake people up. I want them to look at their lives differently—to take a different vantage point.” She talked about how we so often follow the path of least resistance, like water running downhill, but that she has felt challenged, from reading about Jesus, to live a different kind of life.

Of course, they interviewed Shoulder-boy as well. Turns out his name is Ash, and he carried on about Kyleigh and how he had found her when he was at rock-bottom from a drug addiction. It was a great story, I guess, but I still wanted to punch his stupid face.

Online, people did what they do. There were a lot of people praising Kyleigh, but there are always haters. They said she was doing it for attention. Some people attacked her because she said Jesus was a great moral teacher, and they took offense. *You’re wrong. He’s the Son of God.* And then there were the guys making their guy-comments. Either she was hot or fat. Or both.

And maybe this is why I didn’t vibe with what she was doing: because I didn’t really think of people as fixable. Sure, there are people like Kyleigh, who actually think about things and actively seek to live good and meaningful lives. But those are few and far between. Most people simply don’t care. You can give them all the information in the world, and they’re still going to shop at Amazon and throw their plastic in the trash. They’re going to idle their car while they sit in the drive-thru, pumping more and more carbon into the atmosphere as they wait

for the burger and fries that will give them diabetes. Because the thing they want more than anything else is comfort.

I couldn't stay mad at Kyleigh. When I saw some of the things people were saying about her online, I texted her and told her not to read the comments. Things were busy at work, and I was driving all over the Detroit area, hitting job sites from Dearborn to Dexter, but I still found time most days to stop by Shain Park and bring her a cup of coffee. She was a total iced coffee addict, something Shoulder-boy didn't know about her.

That Saturday, when I showed up with coffee, she said I was a life saver. She kept blinking while we talked. I could tell she wasn't doing great. It was hot. We were into the low nineties, and it was worse on the pavement where she was still setting up for World Upside Down. It was mid-day, so her standing board wasn't offering any shade, and we hid under a nearby tree. A breeze kicked up, which made it tolerable.

“How much longer are you going to do this?” I asked.

“As long as it takes.” She blew the damp hair out of her face.

“To accomplish what?”

“I don't know. To feel like I've done something, like people have heard me.”

She was wearing her standard Upside-Down outfit: three quarter length leggings and a t-shirt tied in a ball at her waist. Her hair was a mess.

“I'm just worried about you,” I said. “And I don't understand how this ends.”

She lectured me about how it wasn't supposed to be easy. She had gone into this project knowing that it was going to be uncomfortable, and she wasn't going to stop because it was hot. It was summer. It was supposed to be hot. I told her to drink lots of water and not to push it too far. She said, "I am," and we left it there.

That afternoon, I had a shit-ton of work to do, so I stayed at a coffee shop in Birmingham and banged out a bunch of emails. I was behind on everything, partially because we were overcommitted, and my subcontractors were overcommitted—and it didn't help that I was zipping off to Shain Park every day to watch my best friend stand on her head.

Anyway, afternoon turned into evening, and I walked over to this great Mediterranean place for felafel. It was while I was eating my dinner that I got a call from a local Birmingham number. I don't normally answer calls from numbers I don't recognize, but I picked up. It was Kyleigh's dad. He was worried.

"There's this whole Upside Down thing," he said, "And honestly, she was acting different before that."

"I did notice a few things," I said. I had just finished eating, so I threw my wrapper in the trash and started down the street, passing Birmingham's line of upscale restaurants, boutiques, and jewelry stores. Now that the sun was dropping lower in the sky, it was almost pleasant to be out walking.

That's when he started talking about how she had mental health issues. "You know how she would sometimes disappear during college," he said.

"Yeah. I did notice that."

He said that she struggled with anxiety and depression. They had worked

hard to keep it in check, but Kyleigh always had a mind of her own. “Do you understand me, Ryan?”

“Sure,” I said. I had figured some of that out on my own—the depression piece, for sure—but, of course, I didn’t know the extent of the issue.

Mr. Patterson asked me to talk to her. He said that he and Kyleigh’s mom had tried having a conversation, but she shut them down.

“I mean, I’ll try,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said. “That’s all I ask.”

This next part of the story is a little embarrassing. I decided to wait and follow her when she left the park. Creepy as hell, I know, but the call from her dad made me feel like I had permission. Someone needed to figure out what was going on, though I’ll admit, what I really wanted to know was whether she was meeting Ash.

It wasn’t the easiest subterfuge to pull off. In Michigan, it stays light forever in the summer, and I was driving my work truck with the name of the company, VanDyke Builders, on both sides of the vehicle. I really had to keep my distance, and right off the bat, I got caught at a traffic light while her white pickup truck went sailing through. But then I got lucky. She hit the next red. Plus, with her standing board strapped to the bed of the truck, she was pretty easy to see.

She pulled onto Woodward, the main highway through Birmingham, and I thought we might be heading out of town, but then she turned into a strip mall and walked into a Mexican restaurant. I was on lookout for Ash, but soon she was walking back to her truck with a bag of take-out. When she pulled out of the parking lot, she headed back where she came from. She wasn’t leaving town. She

was going back to her parents' place—probably to eat her dinner and go to bed.

I drove home to my third-floor apartment in West Bloomfield. I was pretty tired, but I decided to sit on my little balcony and watch the sunset. I poured myself a couple fingers of bourbon. Neat because ice was for sissies.

I felt pathetic. Here she was doing something good, something she believed in, and the best I could do was bring her a cup of coffee. And even that had an ulterior motive. There was a party in one of the other units, and I heard the music whenever the patio door opened and disappear when it shut. Eventually, the party ended, and the crickets took over, chirping like mad, filling the empty space.

The second week of World Upside Down is when the protests started. It started on Sunday, but I wasn't there. I was visiting my family back in Vicksburg, about an hour and a half away. Friends of my parents live on a lake down there, and we spent the day on the boat. We drank some beers, cranked some classic rock, and generally pretended like we were back in the Aughts. Living light. I got home late. Probably shouldn't have driven.

While I was wasting away at my parents, Kyleigh was at Shain Park. She was counting down from her one o'clock stand when people from this super conservative church showed up. She was getting down from her head stand, a process that was increasingly laborious. Instead of flipping onto her feet, she basically crumbled to the ground. Then she pulled herself up, climbing to her feet, trying to collect herself. The church people were already getting into her face, even though she was still dizzy, still leaning against the standing board. They demanded she repent. They said that her outfit was lewd, and that she was stealing

God's glory, whatever that means. They were angry that she had called Jesus a great moral teacher. She said that a woman had tears in her eyes when she called it blasphemy.

Kyleigh tried explaining herself. She said she loved Jesus. She said she didn't know if Jesus was the son of God or not—that she hadn't figured that out for herself—but she wanted people to know about his life and teaching. But she also said she had a mission, and she wasn't going to back down.

On Monday, when I brought her coffee, there was a double protest going on. The religious people were protesting Kyleigh, and now Kyleigh's supporters were protesting the protesters. Ash had joined Kyleigh at the standing board.

It turned out that the real issue for the church people was that they couldn't get permission from the city to set up a nativity in Shain Park, and here was Kyleigh doing her thing right in front of the Freedom Sculpture. When I arrived on the scene, a journalist was telling her that the church had filed a complaint with the city and were threatening a lawsuit. They had a lawyer from one of those religious law groups, the Alliance Defending Freedom. These are the people who defend bakers who won't make cakes for gay weddings.

“You're going to want to lawyer up,” he said.

Kyleigh was tired. I could see it in her eyes. She was rolling her neck around.

“I have a permit,” she said.

“Hey, you can do what you want,” he said, “but, personally, I wouldn't want to see these assholes win.”

When the journalist was gone, I moved closer. “I mean, your dad's a

lawyer,” I said.

“My dad isn’t going to help me,” she said. She looked past me when she said it like she was talking to someone behind me.

I had to leave for work, but I came back later that day. It was seven in the evening, her second-to-last stand of the day, and there was a big crowd. The protestors had gone home, unwilling to keep pace with Kyleigh’s commitment, but I was able to hide behind her group of supporters. I walked up to the chalkboard. It was mostly empty, so I had plenty of room to write the words, *I believe in you*. Then I found a space where I could see Kyleigh through the crowd. They were counting down, as she struggled to the finish. Her hands were spread wide against her wrestling mat, balancing her body, holding it against the standing board. Her arms were shaking.

Most of the Crew was now out of state. Sara was down in Indianapolis, a five-hour drive. Derek was still around, working for an investment firm downtown, and doing pretty well for himself. He said he was busy, but he offered to shift his schedule around and spend some time at the park. Between me, and Derek, and Ash, we tried to make sure that one of us was hanging around Kyleigh as much as possible.

We texted back and forth about our schedule and how Kyleigh was doing, and it was a good thing, too, because the heat kept coming and the protestors did, too. Each five-minute stand was an ordeal. Kyleigh needed help getting up and down from her standing board. One time, there was no one there except an old lady who was walking her dog, and Kyleigh later admitted that the whole scene

was ridiculous with this poor lady trying to hold onto her feet while she flailed and kicked.

In the mornings, she did okay, but in the evenings, after a long day in the heat, working the standing board, it was an adventure. During her last couple of stands, her arms would shake uncontrollably. She looked like she was fighting an earthquake. I hated watching, but I needed to keep my eyes on her in case she fell.

The hardest part was calling her dad. But sometimes we have to make compromises, even when we're doing the right thing.

It was around ten that night when her dad texted me, letting me know that she had gone to sleep. He left the garage door open. I had the tools I needed. After all, I worked for a construction company.

I snuck into the garage and, as quietly as possible, loaded the standing board onto the bed of my truck. I used a couple of tie-downs, cinching the board tight, and then I drove back to the shop.

I unscrewed the legs, and I could feel the tension unwind in my body. It was the right decision. There had been a death threat. Derek overheard the police telling Kyleigh about it. The police weren't too worried; the threat wasn't specific, just more screaming into the internet. But when Derek texted me and Ash, I knew what I had to do. As I tore through the standing board with my skill saw, I cut straight lines, ripping the plywood into long strips.

I threw the wood into the bed of my truck and brought it back to her garage, so she would know. It was over.

Kyleigh was mad, and I can't blame her. The next morning, she called me

while I was driving to the office.

“Was it you?”

I had planned on just telling her straight up, but I hesitated. I was holding on the bottom of the steering wheel, casual-like.

“Ryan?”

I sighed. “Yes.”

She hung up.

It was a month before she would communicate with me again, two months before I saw her in the flesh. We missed the rest of the good pool weather, but I was happy enough sitting on my balcony with a White Claw or a tumbler of bourbon. On the rocks. It was a sudden inspiration one Saturday afternoon, and I found that I liked it.

When she finally agreed to meet me, I suggested Shain Park of all places. We picked up some shawarma from the Mediterranean place and walked over to the park, found a bench, and sat in the autumn sun. Summer had taken its toll on the perfect grass, turning patches brown. From where we were sitting, we could see the Freedom Sculpture, though we were looking at the figures’ backs.

I told her why I did it. I said I was living by the Ethos. I gave her every reason I could think of why it was time to stop: her health, the heat, the fact that she was guzzling ibuprofen like candy. And, of course, there was a threat on her life.

She was wearing a brace on her hand and wrist. Only the tips of her fingers reached out through the brace, making it hard to handle her shawarma. “It was my decision,” she said. “And you stole that from me.”

“I guess even when I’m trying to be good, I mess things up,” I said.

She gave me a half smile. “Maybe you did the right thing—I don’t know. But you did it the wrong way.”

I looked down at the cement. I knew what she was saying. She was talking about the standing board, and she was talking about our night together, too. I should have talked with her. And I shouldn’t have made my moved when we were drunk.

She stood up. She was short, so she barely had to lean over to kiss me on the cheek. Then she whispered in my ear: “I believe in you.” She said good-bye, and I guess she meant it, because I haven’t really seen her since. A couple of times in passing but we don’t hang out anymore. No more White Claws at the pool. I guess her parents think I’m great, but I think they suck, so it doesn’t mean a whole lot.

It’s been a couple of year now, but someone will still occasionally ask me about Kyleigh and World Upside Down. They might have heard that I was friends with Kyleigh, and they want to know what I think about it. And I suppose in one sense they’re asking whether Kyleigh was legit—whether she was really trying to make a difference or just stumping for attention. But there’s another aspect to the question—whether it made a lick of difference. And that the part’s harder to answer.

On the one hand, I don’t think much more of the humanity than I did. Most people spend their lives hiding from themselves. People are cowards, they really are. But every once in a while, I’ll be sitting on my little balcony, or I’ll be out on

the lake in Vicksburg, and I'll have a vision of Kyleigh at her standing board. Not just a memory, but a vision, if you know what I mean—like it's something I'm *supposed* to see. I know it sounds weird, but it's the truth as far as I can tell it. So yeah, I still think about Kyleigh and her standing board, and I guess that answers the question right there. Did it matter? Yeah. Sure, it did. At least for me.

I still act like an ass sometimes, don't get me wrong. I'm not a fundamentally different person. But I want to be. And that's how people change, right? They start wanting something different. Longing for something different. That's some powerful shit right there. It's uncomfortable as hell, but I hope it never goes away.