# Where the Birds Fly Wrong

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

They sent him for the “human angle,” which is how national desks bless small-town funerals. Fly in, capture a tender grief, file a Sunday A-section palate cleanser between markets and indictments. David Kincaid said yes because you don’t say no to an assignment with the masthead’s weight on it—and because the word Florida snuck into the pitch and started poking old scar tissue.

He took the rental off the interstate, past palmetto scrub and a white mesa of waste that pretended to be a mountain. Phosphogypsum. He’d known the word since he was a boy in a trailer park down the road; it had sounded like a spelling-bee trick then. Now it just looked permanent. When the sun hit the stack, it glared like bone.

The church was cinderblock and faith, its hand-painted sign insisting GOD IS BIGGER THAN CANCER with an E that slouched as if tired of making the claim. Inside: lilies, floor polish, a piano losing a fight with tune. On a poster board, a seven-year-old in a superhero T-shirt grinned out at a room that could not stand to look away. Micah Harper, Age 7.

# Reading sample — continued



David kept to the back. He wrote what editors call texture: a cousin’s plastic dinosaur, the pastor’s thin-voiced “God does not make mistakes,” a folding chair surrendering beneath a teenage boy who had to sit before he fell. He didn’t write the metallic sweetness that leaked in from the clinic down the road. He didn’t write that the smell made part of him twelve again and braced for quiet bad news.

After, in heat that turned air into an occupation, a man in a sun-bleached cap said, “You’re the reporter.”

“Yeah,” David said, turning the press badge inward. “Kincaid.”

“Ralph,” the man said. Up close he looked like a scarecrow that had learned what pain costs. “You got a minute? Somewhere not under a cross.”

They walked to the shade of a listing slash pine. From there you could see the stack, that white cliff on the horizon that never blinked.

“You know what that is,” Ralph said.

“Fertilizer waste,” David said. “Phosphogypsum.”

Ralph nodded once. “We were told it was safe if we stacked it. Safer if we watched it. Safest if we renamed it.”