Dylan hated church. He understood the idea of it; it gave everyone something to believe in. It gave them an explanation for the unknown. It gave them a set of morals to live by. It gave their life meaning. But most importantly, it gave them an escape. And although Dylan knew all this religion business was a joke, he could accept that not everyone else did. What he could *not* accept was waking up early every Sunday morning, getting dressed in posh, itchy clothing, and crowding in to an ancient, un-air conditioned building with hundreds of strangers. But, despite his best efforts, here he was, sitting uncomfortably on a hard, wooden pew, sulking.

But that wasn’t the worst part. No, it was far from it. As insufferable as it was to endure this torture every week, there was one thing that brought down the experience even more: *Gabriel*. Just looking at him made Dylan’s stomach churn. His curly, blond hair, his spotless white teeth, and his warm, overfriendly smile; Perfect. Or at least that’s what everyone thought. But Dylan knew what was hiding underneath that facade. He could see underneath the mask of friendliness and perfection. Gabriel was a monster, but nobody understood. They saw Dylan’s accusations as cries for attention. After all, why should they believe him? Gabriel was golden. Smart, popular, a straight A student, he everything you could want in a child. And to top it all off, his father was the *priest*! Gabriel was an angel and Dylan... well, Dylan was not.

Shy, awkward, and barely passing school, Dylan was not exactly the town favorite. He had a history of being mentally unstable, which certainly did not help his case. Naturally, many people blamed it on his past. His parents had disappeared when Dylan was a baby. But how could the deaths of people he barely knew scar him? No, it wasn’t his past that upset him, it was his present. It was Gabriel.

In grade 5 health class, the school taught kids about bullying and what to do in situations around it. The whole bully, bystander and victim thing. Of course, Dylan’s Catholic school always added little religious inserts, like “If you bullied someone, pray to god to cleanse yourself of your sins!”, but it was essentially the same thing. Dylan’s case was a textbook example: Gabriel was the bully; Dylan was the victim; and the *entire* town were the bystanders. The one piece that didn’t fall into place, however, was the motive. Why did Gabriel do it? No matter how much he thought about it, Dylan couldn’t put his finger on it. Gabriel’s family life was good. He certainly had never been bullied in the past. So why did he feel the need to pick on Dylan?

The clock struck eleven as the crowd started making their way up to the front for communion. As Dylan and his aunt and uncle edged closer, Gabriel brushed by, bumping in to Dylan and knocking him over.

“Oops! My bad!” Gabriel exclaimed, loud enough for any witnesses to hear, as he offered a hand to Dylan.

But once Dylan was on his feet again, Gabriel leaned in close and whispered, “No wonder your parents didn’t want a scrawny little runt like you.”

A red mist came over Dylan. He had grown used to Gabriel’s teasing and bullying, but this was going too far. Gabriel had tormented him in countless ways - calling Dylan names, hitting him, making fun of him at every possible moment and generally making his life hell – but never before had Gabriel said anything so *hateful*. Dylan was tired of being pushed around, and this was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“Hey, Gabriel!” he called scornfully. Turning around, Gabriel caught the rage in Dylan’s dark eyes and knew he had crossed the line.

He raised his hands apologetically. “I’m sorry; that was uncalled for,” Gabriel said with such sincerity that Dylan almost believed him. But then the ends of his lips curled up into a smirk. That was more than Dylan could take. Gabriel’s smug expression quickly evaporated into shock as Dylan’s fist collided with his face, smashing his pretty little nose.

Dylan felt hundreds of eyes staring at him as the churchgoers turned to watch this sudden change of events. The whole room was silent. Dylan gazed around at the gaping mouths and stunned faces. It was at that point that the realisation of what he had done finally set in. He looked at Aunt Rose and Uncle Fred; they wouldn’t be happy. Quickly, he averted his eyes. He had to get out of here. Dylan turned on his heel and sprinted out the door as tears rolled down his cheeks.

Aunt Rose and Uncle Fred obviously weren’t Dylan’s actual parents, but the elderly couple cared for him nonetheless. Even though he wasn’t a perfect child, they loved him with all their hearts, and although Dylan’s actions had been *horrendous*, they weren’t mad; just upset and worried on his behalf. However, Dylan didn’t see it this way, and he regarded his forced session with a therapist as a punishment. So on Monday morning, he was in a rotten mood as he knocked on the door of the school counsellor.

A man in a wheelchair in his mid forties answered. “Come in,” he said.

“Hi. Are you Dr. Mantus?” Dylan asked as he stepped inside.

“Please, call me Lucas,” the man replied cheerfully, “and you must be Dylan?”

“Yes.” Dylan didn’t know if it was just therapist sorcery, but he was already feeling a connection with Lucas.

“Have a seat,” said Lucas, gesturing to a large armchair in the corner.

Once Dylan was settled down in the reclining chair, Lucas cut to the chase. “So, I heard about your little *incident* yesterday.”

“He got what he deserved.”

“He deserved a broken nose? What makes you say that?”

“He was a bully.”

“Hmmm....” Lucas stroked his beard thoughtfully.

“You don’t believe me, do you? Nobody believes me. They all think I’m just a depressed little boy who’s seeking the attention that his parents never gave him! They think they know my story, but they don’t, and they don’t know Gabriel’s either!” Dylan’s voice had been steadily rising throughout his rant, and he took a deep breath to calm himself before he continued, “I swear to God, *I am not lying*.”

“I believe you. It’s quite obvious, actually. But are you sure that is the only reason you hate him?”

“What do you mean?” Dylan asked skeptically.

“Is there any other reason you hate him so much?”

Dylan didn’t answer.

“Are you sure you’re not jealous?”

Dylan’s cheeks flushed and he looked down, embarrassed, but to his surprise, Lucas just laughed.

“Dylan, you have no reason to be jealous! You are just as good as him!”

“Don’t *lie*. He’s smarter than me, he’s more athletic than me, and he’s more popular. He has *everything*... And I have nothing.”

“Just from this one conversation I can tell that you're a bright kid. All you have to do is apply yourself.”

“Humph. My teachers give me the exact same lecture,” Dylan said jokingly.

“Just promise me that you will do what you can to be better than Gabriel, and I’ll do whatever I can to make sure that you are,” said Lucas.

“I promise,” replied Dylan as a smile appeared on his face.

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As it turned out, Dr. Mantus was right. All Dylan needed was to try his best. Over the next few months, Dylan thrived under Lucas’ influence. He got caught up with his school work, Gabriel left him alone, he started to get into shape and he even made a friend. Lucas had become the father he never had, and although Dylan didn’t really need help any more, they still met regularly. Life was good.

It was the last day of school, and the bell had just rung for a final time. The school was completely deserted, except for two people. Dylan knocked on Lucas’ door grinning ear to ear. He couldn’t wait to tell him the news. At graduation the night before, he had won the most improved award. Most kids take that as a joke, but Dylan was thrilled.

“It’s open!”called Dr. Mantus from inside.

As Dylan barged inside, the smile melted off his face. Lucas’ office was bare. Boxes were stacked high on his walls and his pictures were covered in bubble wrap, “Oh, no. Are you leaving?” he asked.

“I’m afraid so,” Lucas sighed as he wheeled himself into the room.

“You never told me.”

“I didn’t want to trouble you,” Lucas replied, “You are doing so well.”

“Only cause of you!”

“I believe in you, Dylan, and now everyone else does, too. You don’t *need* me anymore.”

Dylan was choking up. This was the last time they would see each other. He sighed, “Well, is there anything I can do to help?” he said, looking around.

“No, I don’t think so...” He hesitated. “Well, maybe there is something. Have I ever told you how I ended up in a wheelchair?”

“I don’t think so.”

“A few years ago, I was walking across the street and was hit by a car. It paralysed me from the waist down. Do you know who was driving that car? Gabriel’s dad. He made a mistake and it resulted in this,” Lucas gestured to his wheelchair. “For months I hated him and I plotted a way to get revenge. But recently, I have found a way to make peace with him. You should do the same with Gabriel.”

Six months ago, Dylan would’ve rejected the idea, but he had matured. “Okay, if that’s what you want,” Dylan agreed grudgingly.

“Thank you. Oh, and bring them this.” Lucas rolled himself over to his desk and picked up a bottle of red wine. “Tell them that I forgive him.”

“Okay, I will.”

After a tearful goodbye, Dylan headed off to Gabriel’s house. He walked up to the door and rang the bell. A few seconds later, Gabriel answered.

“What do *you* want?” He asked cautiously.

“I just wanted to apologise.”

“For punching me? It was a long time ago. It’s okay.” Gabriel said awkwardly.

“Still, I’m sorry. Can you give this to your dad for me, please? Tell him that Lucas forgives him.” Dylan handed Gabriel the wine.

And with that, Dylan left with a smile on his face. Although he had lost Lucas, he felt fulfilled.

The next morning, however, shattered the hope he had felt the night before. The police had found Gabriel’s parents dead, along with a half empty bottle of red wine, spilt around them like blood. They had been poisoned. Dylan’s heart skipped a beat. It was the wine that he had delivered to them for Dr. Mantus. *I have found a way to make peace*. The words echoed through Dylan’s head. Murder. That was his *way.* But really, he hadn’t killed them, Dylan had. It was him who gave them the bottle. Lucas had just been pulling the strings.

Dylan sat growing pale as Aunt Rose told him the news. Without saying a word, he stood up stiffly, and walked out the door. He didn’t know where he was going, and he didn’t care. He walked and he walked until his legs could not carry him any farther. He stopped standing in front of two large wooden doors. He pushed his way in to the empty church and knelt before the cross. He closed his eyes and he prayed. He prayed to God for forgiveness. He prayed for him to take mercy on his soul. He knew it was pointless. He knew that religion was a joke. Yet still Dylan prayed to God for an answer. But mostly, he prayed to God for an escape.

Word Count: 1,977