

Years 9 & 10

1st Place and Best Overall: Kyra Bredenhof

Year 10, John Calvin Christian College

Finlay's Silence

Finlay Graham Blackburn was born on the 2nd of October, 2017. He had a few wisps of gentle blonde hair, massive blue eyes, and he never cried.

At first, Mom and Dad loved that fact. They would gush,

“Oh, he’s such a peaceful baby!”

“Look at him, so innocent and calm!”

But after a few months, they started to get worried.

I would hear them whisper late at night,

“Do you think there’s something wrong with him?”

“Should we take him to the doctor?”

They even asked me for advice.

“Kade, do you remember how long it was before your other brothers and sisters started making noises or crying?”

“Does this seem unusual to you, dear?”

I usually answered with a non-committal grunt or assured my parents not to worry.

To be honest, I never thought much of it – I was too busy playing video games and kicking around a soccer ball with my friends. As the oldest of 6, I was used to keeping myself occupied when a new baby was born. Mom and Dad would always be too busy caring for the baby: feeding it, taking it to appointments, visiting with grandparents and in-laws.

I got it. I understood. But this time was . . . different.

Mom and Dad were constantly trying to come up with different methods and remedies for helping Finlay. I would wake up in the middle of the night to hear classical music playing in Finlay’s bedroom, or I would find lavender or chamomile diffusers in every corner of the house. My parents tried reading the dictionary to him, feeding him obscure brands of baby food, and even pinching his cheeks over and over.

But nothing worked. Finlay still did not cry. He still did not whimper. He made no noise at all. My dad suggested he might have autism or a reduced lung capacity, but that didn’t explain Finlay’s perfect serenity. He would just lay in his crib, blinking slowly, looking around him, as if everything was all right in the world.

It had been six months. My parents got more and more worried with every passing day. I would come home from school to find my mother crying as she cradled Finlay, hoping for some reaction, some tiny noise. It got harder and harder for my parents to guess when he was hungry, or tired, or when he needed to be changed. Mom and Dad took him to our family doctor, Dr Ferris, but he just assured them that there was no need to panic. Finlay’s speech and language development could be monitored once he reached 10 months old, Dr Ferris said, but for now, there was nothing to worry about.

Life carried on as normal after we heard that news, although we could never really forget about the strange silence of the youngest member of our family.

Another six months passed, and we celebrated Finlay's first birthday. But he still made no noise.

Mom and Dad started to take Finlay to speech and language pathologists, hoping they would be able to understand the problem. He had an appointment almost every week and saw so many different doctors that we couldn't even remember all their names, but there was still no change.

I think my parents began to accept Finlay's quietness, because after a few months of new doctors and specialists, the number of appointments dwindled to one per month, and then none at all. Life went back to how it had been before.

But it was on the 5th of December, 2018, the day after my 13th birthday, that we realised how much Finlay – and his silence – really mattered.

My dad's brother and his family came over for dinner, and I had enjoyed the night with my cousins skating on our homemade rink in the backyard, and, when it got too dark, watching movies in my bedroom. They left our house at 10pm, and us kids had to promptly go to bed. Finlay was already sleeping in his crib, and my younger brother Ryan, who was four years old at the time, was also in bed.

"Kade, be quiet when you go down the hallway, okay? I don't want Ryan to wake up."

"Yeah, sure Dad. I'll watch out for Fin too."

I tiptoed past Finlay's room, which lay on the opposite side of the house from all the rest of the bedrooms. Mom and Dad were originally going to have him sleep in their room so that when he woke up at night, they'd be able to be with him right away. Once my parents discovered Finlay didn't wake up at all in the middle of the night, however, they put him on the other end of the house where we wouldn't bother his rest.

"Thanks, Kade. Goodnight," Dad said softly.

It was about midnight when I heard it.

A baby crying.

And not just any baby. Finlay.

I yanked back my covers and hurried down the hallway. My younger brother Evan, who shared a room with me, had gotten out of bed as well. I met him and both my parents in the hallway.

"Is that Finlay?" Evan gasped. The crying was getting louder and more desperate.

"It's gotta be," I said, shivering in my thin pyjamas.

"Oh, I hope he's okay!" Mom gushed as she ran down the hallway and wrapped her robe tightly around her shoulders. Ryan, who was whimpering from being woken up by all the noise, grabbed onto the end of her robe. My little sisters were here now too, following us to Finlay's bedroom.

"What's everyone doing out of bed?" Dad asked, glancing around at me and my five siblings, all gathered in the hall.

"Finlay's crying for the first time *ever*, Dad! Of *course* we want to know what he's crying about!" 11-year-old Lila snapped.

The wailing intensified, almost as if Finlay was urging us to come quickly. Almost as if he *needed* us to be there. All of us.

It seemed to take forever to get down the hallway to Finlay's room, although I knew it had only been a minute at most since I had woken up. Mom threw open the door and we rushed in. Finlay was sitting up in his cot, his face twisted and wet with tears. The screams sounded so strange coming from him, a baby whom we thought would be silent forever.

"Fin . . ." whispered Mom, walking towards the cot with her arms outstretched.

"Why's he crying, Mommy?" Grace, who was five years old, started to ask, but Dad interrupted her.

"Hang on," he said softly, carefully sniffing the air. "What's that smell?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, a thunderous noise shook the house.

"Daddy!"

My siblings' cries and screams pounded in my head.

Screams and smoke distorted my senses, and the bitter taste of fear filled my mouth.

"What's going on?" I shouted over the chaos.

"Explosion!" was the only reply I could make out. I saw Dad running out of Finlay's room, down the hallway, towards the backyard.

"Dad! Wait! Where are you going?" I called out. "Mom, where's he going?"

"He thinks the barbecue exploded," Mom said unsteadily. Tears streamed down her too-pale cheeks.

"Mommy, I'm scared!" sobbed Grace.

"Ssh honey, I know. But the barbecue is *far* away from Finlay's room. It's a good thing we're all in here, otherwise . . ." she trailed off.

Dad came running back into the room, his face shiny with sweat and contorted with worry.

"Yeah, it was the barbecue. Whole backyard's on fire, and the back half of the house."

His voice shook. I had never seen him look so . . . *afraid*.

"I'll call the fire department," Mom said, reaching inside her robe for her phone.

"Are we gonna die, Daddy?" Evan asked.

"No, Ev. We'll be fine," Dad said. "But we need to get out of the house."

He opened the window and carefully started helping my siblings climb out to safety.

Fortunately, our house was only one storey, so it wasn't a long drop. Mom cradled Finlay carefully in her arms as she lowered herself to the ground and rushed across the street. We all followed close behind her, with Dad keeping up the rear.

I can still see it all clearly in my mind's eye – the house illuminated by flickering orange flames, smoke billowing into the night air, the ominous glow of the fire lighting up the whole street.

Everything went so fast, and before I knew it, the fire department had arrived and put out the fire. Most of the house was still standing, except for the back hall, where most of our bedrooms had been.

"Yeah, so the fire was caused by some sort of gas leak in the barbecue. It was a problem with the manufacturing, and, yeah, nothing that you could have prevented," one of the firefighters said. "It's good that none of you were injured. It's best to call your insurance company as soon as you can, but yeah, for now just be glad that the fire's out."

"Thanks so much for coming on time," Mom said, absentmindedly stroking Finlay's soft hair.

"Yeah, that's our job," the firefighter said as he nodded firmly. "What are the chances that none of you were in your rooms at the moment when the barbecue exploded though?"

“Well, that’s the thing,” Dad answered, glancing over at my mom and the again-peaceful baby in her arms. “This little guy started crying, so we all went to his room.”

“Hang on, you *all* went to his room just because he was crying? Isn’t that, yeah, a bit extreme?” the firefighter said.

“It’s . . . a long story,” Dad shook his head and laughed. “But if Finlay hadn’t woken us all up and made us get out of bed to check on him, I probably wouldn’t be here to tell the tale.”

I looked down at the baby in my mother’s arms, resting his head on her shoulders.

“What’s your story, Finlay?” I whispered into his ear. “How did you know when the right time to make a noise would be?”

Finlay just looked up at me, his perfect blue eyes blinking slowly, and stayed silent. But I didn’t really expect anything else.

“You’re a real hero, little dude,” the firefighter said, ruffling Finlay’s fuzzy hair.

“Yeah,” I said with a smile. “I guess he is.”

Even years later, I wondered about that fire. I wondered if Finlay somehow *knew* about it; if he *knew* not to make noise until we needed him to. I wondered if *he* remembered that day, all those years ago; if he remembered how grateful we had been for him that night; how grateful we *still* were for him. He saved all our lives, whether he meant to or not.

I didn’t notice this at the time, but it was as *soon* as we heard the explosion that Finlay was calm again. No more crying, just back to his peaceful self, as if he had never begun to make noise in the first place.

And Finlay is still silent today. His teachers describe him as a shy and quiet student who only talks when it really matters. And I guess that’s a good way to describe him.

Because Finlay’s silence – and his sound, however frequent it may be – *matters*.

Whatever the reason, whatever the explanation, Finlay saved us that day.

And Finlay taught me that to be someone great, to be a *hero*, you don’t need a loud powerful voice, or a talent for public speaking. You don’t need to be someone beautiful, or someone everyone likes. No, the best heroes are the ones nobody expects, the ones who are heroes for the simple reason that they did something important, something for someone else.

That firefighter was right. Finlay was – Finlay still *is* – a hero.

And maybe it’s the silent heroes who make the greatest impact of all.