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Opening extract from
Here I Stand

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INTRODUCTION

As the vastly outnumbered Scottish forces looked out over the looming ranks of the English army on a September morning in 1297, William Wallace, the Scottish knight and leader, roared: *They may take our lives, but they will never take our freedom!*

In that moment, Wallace – or rather Mel Gibson playing Wallace in the screen version *Braveheart* – was tapping into the deep truth that the freedoms we enjoy today are worth dying for; and have in fact been paid for, in blood, many times over.

Today our freedoms and liberties include the right to vote for our leaders, the prohibition on the use of torture, the right not to be arbitrarily detained, the right to speak freely and the right to protest.

Freedoms do not spontaneously arrive, and they are not handed to citizens by benevolent rulers. Our freedoms in the UK were gained through a long and often bloody history of slowly establishing limits on the powers of mighty monarchs and tyrannical rulers.

The history of Western freedoms has many important milestones, including King John signing Magna Carta in 1215; the Bill of Rights in 1689; the US Bill of Rights in 1791; the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act; the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to name but a

few. Campaigns, demonstrations, protests and legal battles have resulted in many people now being able to vote in their leaders, enjoy greater protections at work and have the right not to be discriminated against.

But we need to be ever vigilant, because the freedoms that have been hard won for us can be lost in a moment by the stroke of a politician's pen – as they were in the UK during the World Wars, when the army was given control over almost every aspect of civilian life and many injustices were suffered by ordinary people.

The greatest threats to liberty today come not from terrorism but from the fear of terrorism and our politicians' misguided quest for absolute security. Unlike Wallace, the cry of the modern government at the first whiff of a terrorist threat is: *They can take our freedoms, but they cannot take our lives.*

We should not go along with governments' counter-terrorism strategies that attempt to criminalize thought, limit free speech, restrict access to courts, ban protests and put society under continuous CCTV and internet surveillance. We must all be jealous guardians of our freedoms, and appreciate that many of the liberties that we enjoy in the West are still being fought for by citizens in other parts of the world who are ruled by dictators and tyrannical regimes.

To protect our freedoms and ensure that they are not diluted or removed, we need to:

- CARE about rights and freedoms, want them for society and speak up for them when they are under attack;
- QUESTION politicians and leaders when they say it is necessary to remove freedoms to create a safer society: ask them where their actions will lead;
- ACT – there are many small actions we can all take to safeguard our freedoms: write letters (see page 313), speak out against injustice, vote, join campaigns and attend demonstrations.

Every gain for human rights and those freedoms we enjoy began with one or two people recognizing that something was worth fighting for, and joining with other like-minded people to make a difference. I hope you will all be inspired to do the same.

Jules Carey, Partner, Bindmans LLP

HARVESTER ROAD

John Boyne

Damien, age 8

I still miss my dad. I don't remember him very well because I was only four when he got cancer and died. Mum said that he hadn't been feeling well so he went in for tests but by then it was already too late and he was gone within a few weeks. Mark says that I'm the only one who can stop Mum from getting cancer and dying too. So far, I must be doing a good job because she's really healthy and last week she won a badminton tournament and took home a trophy that she put on the mantelpiece next to my music prizes. I can tell she's really proud of it. She doesn't know that if

it weren't for me, she wouldn't have won anything. She probably wouldn't even be alive.

I used to call Mark "Dr Richardson", but when he moved into our house on Harvester Road he said that I should call him Mark. After he and Mum got married he asked me if I wanted to call him Dad, but I said no and he seemed a bit disappointed. He wasn't trying to take my real dad's place, he told me, no one could ever do that, but I should know that he would always be there for me just like my real dad would have been if he hadn't got cancer and died.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays Mum plays badminton and then she goes for a drink with the girls and doesn't get home till I'm asleep. She calls it her Me Time. When I go up to bed, Mark comes with me. First he reads me a story and then we play the game that stops Mum getting cancer and dying.

I wish I'd known Mark when I was four because then we could have started playing it earlier and maybe Dad wouldn't have got cancer and died. He was the one who explained to me the way medicine works and told me that I couldn't tell anyone or it wouldn't work and then Mum would get cancer and die and it would just be him and me, and I didn't want that to happen.

Months ago, Mum started to get sick and I asked Mark if we should play the game more often, but he said no, twice a week was enough. Mum was throwing up every

morning and I got really worried. After a few months, though, she stopped getting sick and got fat instead and last week my baby brother was born. Mark said we should call him Edward after my real dad, and Mum cried and said that was the most thoughtful thing she had ever heard in her life and she was so lucky to have found a man like him, a second chance of happiness when lots of people don't even get one. All babies look the same to me but Mark says that Edward is something special and will be very handsome one day. Just give him a few years, he tells me, just give him till he's your age, Damien, and you'll see how beautiful he is.

Rachel, age 14

Julia Sheers used to be my best friend but she's not any more. I hate her: she smells and she's got spots. She hates me too because I'm prettier than her and she knows it. She used to like Steven Hailey and she sent him a note in class one day saying, *Do you like me?* with two boxes underneath that said *Yes* and *No*. It was so embarrassing. Steven sent it back with a third box saying, *I'm out of your league*, and put a big *X* inside it. I took a photo of the note and sent it to Donna Wilton, who I really want to be friends with because she's the prettiest girl in our class. When I showed it to Justin, he said that was mean and I felt a bit ashamed of myself. I didn't want him to stop liking me so I deleted the

photo and told him that I was going to punch Steven in the face for what he'd done but Justin said that violence doesn't solve anything and I should just let things be.

I knew that I was in love with Justin on the first day of Mrs Richardson's maternity leave, when he came in and told us that he would be our substitute teacher for the rest of the year. He was wearing blue jeans, a white shirt and a really cool tie that he kept loosened in front of an open collar. He had sexy stubble and glasses but he only put them on when he was reading. When he asked my name I could tell that he liked me. And, *no*, it's not some silly schoolgirl crush, *actually*, because he's *told* me that he loves me and that we're going to spend the rest of our lives together and buy a house and go to concerts and have dinner parties where our friends come over and we try out recipes from Jamie Oliver's books.

Every time we do it, Justin cries afterwards and says that we can't do it ever again but then he texts me the next day and asks if I want to come over after choir practice, which actually just proves how much he loves me. When we first did it, it really hurt and it still does sometimes because he goes so quickly. It's like he just wants to get it over with but I've read in magazines that if you do it slowly it's even better. I've told him this but he says that we'll do it slowly in a few years' time when I'm out of school and we can tell people that we're in love and going to live together for the rest of our lives. Until then I'm supposed

to keep *shtum*, which is a word from when he was my age that means *quiet*.

We've seen the house that we want to live in, too. It's on Harvester Road, a few doors down from where Mrs Richardson lives. It has three bedrooms and a granny flat that Justin says he could use as his studio because he's really artistic actually. The people who live there need to just sell it and move to a village somewhere with a pub and a garden centre like those posh twats you always see on *Relocation*, *Relocation*.

Melissa, age 26

I don't care what anyone says; I know for a fact that the boys *love* it. It's not like I force them to do anything they don't want to do, after all. They're the ones who look like they'll explode if I don't let them. They're so sweet, actually, and so grateful. I honestly think that I'm doing a really kind thing. Years from now, when they're grown up and having proper adult relationships, they'll think of me and probably want to thank me.

Anyway, it's not like I do it that often. Four times a year at most, when my company holds its quarterly sales conference in London. I stay in a hotel and make sure to give myself a free day after work is over to do a bit of shopping and have some time away from James. I love James, of

course I do, but everyone needs a little space, don't they? And then, once I've had a little drink or two, I go into one of the chat rooms and see who's around.

Eric was the first but he was a little older than I usually go for. He was sixteen, and when he turned his webcam on he reminded me a little of a young Adam Sandler. Kind of goofy looking but kind of cute too. He was only two tube stops away, Harvester Road, and he was in my room in less than thirty minutes. I learnt a lesson after that, though. It was obvious that it wasn't his first time, and that's not what I'm into. I prefer it when the boy is completely innocent. Even a little frightened.

So the second time, the boy – I think his name was Jack – was fourteen. He was incredibly nervous but when I said he could leave if he wanted, he shook his head and looked so confused that it was totally adorable and I told him that we would take things very slow. Afterwards he asked, could we meet again? And I didn't want to disappoint him so I gave him my phone number. Well, it wasn't my real number, of course, just a set of random digits that I scribbled on a piece of hotel stationery, but he seemed pleased.

Since then I've probably met about fifteen to twenty boys. All types: I don't discriminate. Black, white, tall, short. Spots, no spots. Sometimes I take pity on some fat kid and let him come over so he'll have a story to tell his friends, even though there's no chance that they'll believe

him. One boy tried to take a photo once, for proof, but I made him delete it. I thought that was incredibly disrespectful of him.

I've stopped using my preferred hotel, though, because a maid walked in on me one time and went pale before running out again. Then I got a call from the manager asking me to leave. Now I always put the *Do Not Disturb* sign on and latch the door so there can be no surprises. The new hotel is nice but the towels in the other one were fluffier. Still, you can't have everything.

Anyway, I don't care what anyone says. There's nothing wrong with it, there's nothing dirty about it and no boy has ever left my room without a smile on his face. You could say that I'm providing a public service. Not that anyone will ever find out. I wouldn't let that happen. I'm too careful. But I'm a good person, really I am.

Justin, age 34

I didn't want to be a teacher. I wanted to be an actor. I applied to RADA when I left school but I failed my audition. Then I tried my hand at playwriting but I could never get one finished. Then I thought about novels but it was even harder to get one of those started. I just feel that inside me, at my core, I'm an artist, you know? A creative person. Perhaps I'm still too young and I simply haven't found my

voice yet. I mean, I'm only thirty-four. Practically still in my twenties.

Anyway, I know one thing for sure: I'm never going to be a real teacher, only a substitute. That way I can leave a place pretty quickly when whoever I'm replacing comes back. School isn't like it was when I was a boy. The kids all know so much and they seem to despise me, which doesn't make any sense as I'm not that much older than they are. The boys try to act hard by taking the piss out of me, but the girls are worse, with all their flirting. Don't take this the wrong way, but even at fourteen you can tell whether or not a girl is going to be hot in the future. Julia, for example: no. Rachel: absolutely. Carla: no. Donna: well, she already is.

Of course the thing about Donna is that she's not really fourteen at all. I mean, yes, she's fourteen in terms of her *actual* age, but at heart she's at least nineteen or twenty. Which is only a few years younger than me. A woman trapped in a child's body. She's so knowing and always dresses to impress. I can see her working in a solicitor's office in the future, maybe. Or managing a commercial radio station. Something like that.

Rachel was a mistake that should never have happened. Samantha and Karen: well, if I could go back in time, no, I wouldn't have asked them, though they seemed pleased to be chosen. But Donna? Donna is something different. The truth is *she* seduced *me*, not the other way around. I know that sounds crazy, a kid that age seducing a grown man,

but it's what happened. I actually had no say in the matter, none at all. If I told you the things she said to me you would absolutely agree that no healthy man could have said no to her. It's her fault, when you think of it, although I'm not really keen on apportioning blame. I wonder what her family background is like? She must have had a troubled childhood. Well, maybe I've taken her out of herself a bit. I hope so. She's a nice kid really. But such a *flirt*!

Joseph, age 92

There's not many of us left alive who remember the Blitz. Historians write about it and I've seen it portrayed in films but they never get it right. They don't understand how frightening it was, the terror that would descend on us every evening when the sun went down and we knew it wouldn't be long before the sirens sounded, the skies were full of Luftwaffe bombers and it was a race to the bomb shelters. I had a rotten time of it because I was nineteen and everyone looked at me as if to say, *What's the matter with you, Sunshine? Why aren't you out there doing your bit like the rest of them?* Sometimes I'd explain about my heart condition but I could see they didn't believe me and thought I was a coward. I wished I had an ailment that was more obvious: a patch on one eye or a set of crutches.

It was dark down there in the tunnels and people got

lost easily. Children became separated from their parents. I tried to help them. I'd take hold of one, a little girl usually, and tell her there was nothing to worry about. I'd wrap my arms around her when the lights went out and the bombs fell over Eastman Street and Harvester Road and none of us knew whether or not our houses would still be standing when we got out again. *If* we got out again. There was always the chance that the roof of the shelter would cave in and crush us all.

The little girls liked it when I held them. I know they did, because they always stopped crying and snuggled in like kittens. They couldn't see me in the darkness and I thought I was doing the right thing, holding them close like that. But the other things I did, when I look back I can see that perhaps they weren't quite right. And if any of those little girls were here beside me now perhaps I'd even apologize to them. But they've probably forgotten all about it anyway, so no harm done. Children are very resilient; everyone says so. If they think of me at all, they might think fondly of the man who took good care of them when they were frightened.

Sometimes when I watch the television news and see a woman in her seventies, someone in the public eye like a politician or an actress, I look at her and wonder where she grew up and does she remember the Blitz and, if she does, can she recall the underground bunkers and the man who took care of her and showed her a little tenderness when

she most needed it? And then I think, well look at her now! She's made a real go of her life. Which sets my mind at ease because then I know that I didn't do any harm, not really.

Stephen, age 32

Today was a good day. Some of the kids, when they first start to talk, are embarrassed or ashamed or frightened. They're worried what their friends will think of them, if people will blame them or say they're just making it up. But Damien? I've never met a fourteen-year-old like him. Smart. Brave. And angry too, of course, but able to control that anger. Able to use it.

He wasn't intimidated by the courtroom, the press gallery or the judge. When the defence counsel accused him of being a liar, he looked her right in the eye and said, "Of course I'm a liar. I'm a teenager. I tell lies every day to get me out of trouble or detention or to rent an 18 game. But I'm not lying about this. Every word I've said here today is true. Every single one. You can twist them; you can call me names; you can choose to believe me or not. It's up to you. But I'm telling the truth."

When he talked about his little brother, I knew that we were going to get a conviction. "Edward is really annoying most of the time," he said. "He comes into my room without knocking. He steals my Xbox. He jumps on top

of me on a Saturday morning when I'm trying to sleep. He drives me nuts. But that night, when I saw Mark looking at him the way he had looked at me when he first moved in, I knew I had to say something. Now that it's come out, all the lads in my year are calling me gay. They can call me whatever they want: I don't care. So can you. But this is what happened. And it will happen to Edward too if you don't stop him."

Moments like this make my job worthwhile. My mates ask me, how can I do it? Does it not affect me? And of course it does. Sometimes when I go down the pub after a case has gone badly, it's all I can do not to scream out loud in frustration. But when Damien stood tall in the witness box and didn't flinch as he recounted every detail, I looked across at Dr Richardson, saw the complete lack of emotion on his face and knew that I was doing something worthwhile. The man just didn't care. Unlike that teacher we caught last year who blamed it all on the girls in his class. That guy broke down and cried like a baby when they sentenced him and I felt even more disgusted by him than I had before.

Anyway, the case is closed. And it's an early night for me. But I won't forget Damien in a hurry. That boy is going to do something important with his life: I can just tell.

What am I talking about? He already has.