

Staying Strong
By Andrea Louise Watson

The mornings are still as hectic as ever, making sure Jake has done his homework, and Darcy is not spending too long in the bathroom. The never-ending search for school shoes, and trying to remember if they need gym kit or ingredients for baking, or if it is dress as a book character day. Making coffee and toast for Phil while he slowly gets ready, never helping me one iota. Have the kids done their homework? What after school clubs is it today? Are we having their friends round for tea? What do I need for work before I can leave the house on school run? It's on those mornings, amongst the chaos, that everything seems to be normal again, and the world is turning, as it should. Then as we all sit down for breakfast I realise I have set 5 places again for 1 brief second I have forgotten and empty chair screams at me. I can't crumble, I can't let anyone see. I am the one that steers our family ship.

During the day I throw myself into work and then it is another hectic evening of cooking tea and checking homework and forcing teeth brushing. I'm exhausted by 8pm, but I don't want it to stop. I don't want to sit and watch TV or read a book, or cuddle in to Phil. I don't want hugs or affection, I don't deserve them and when Phil tries to put his arm around me, it's like acid on my skin. The marriage it over but I have asked him to stay for normality and even told him he can take a lover, as long he doesn't tell me. I heard him crying in the bathroom last week. I put a pillow over my head to drown it out.

On Sunday, I was cleaning out the garage, trying to find some paint to retouch the bathroom, and I found his football tucked in the corner. It was covered in dried mud and I sat alone in the garage holding on to a stupid bit of rubber, because it made me feel closer to him. This stupid £5 piece of rubbish that he wasn't even interested in. He hadn't kicked about in months, but because his hands had touched it. I needed to hold it. And I did cry, I cried for one hour, alone in a dark garage. So I guess I am capable of feelings after all.