

INT. MEETING ROOM

Ash takes a seat centre stage.

ASH

My name is Ashden. And I'm here today to talk to you about my experience and what I think you should hear.

He then props himself forward and prepares to share

ASH (CONT'D)

I haven't always been the guy you see before you, like everyone in this room we all have a story to tell and experiences that have shaped us. Mine is no different to you, or you and even you

He points around the room, at specific audience members, He takes a moment of reflection.

ASH (CONT'D)

I think it had been about a year and a half or 2 years I cant recall exact dates. I remember coming home after a long day and seeing Sienna sitting down just looking spaced out. So I put my things down and I went and sat next to her and asked her what was wrong

ASH (CONT'D)

We are pregnant. She said.
(beat)

ASH (CONT'D)

I went quiet, and asked if she was sure, it sounds dumb now but naturally it was the first thing that came to mind. She then pointed to a stick on the table

He points at the table.

ASH (CONT'D)

I didn't even pick it up, I gave it one look then back at her, then I just started crying, now I not talking sob tears I talking full blown when you're mum says stop crying or ill give you something to cry for tears. It was real.

ASH (CONT'D)

I was at work one day, finishing up and my phone goes off, it had rang a few times in the day but to be honest I didn't think anything of it. So I answer and its Sienna, hello? Babe? Nothing. Sienna, are you there? I put the phone on loudspeaker and hold it to my ear. Sienna? Then I hear a faint voice almost as if she had been crying, "ash, can you come to the hospital please". Is everything alright? Now I should have just packed up my stuff and left as soon as. But being a man I tried to decipher it all on the phone so I knew what I was walking into. (Beat) Ok babe, I'm on my way I said.

Ash then gets off the chair.

ASH (CONT'D)

I make my way through the corridor. Find the door and knock, it slowly opens and I'm greeted by a white face, grey beard and a pen behind his ear. Come in take a seat he said. Sienna is sitting there and by this point I knew she had been crying. What's wrong doctor? Sit down please sir. What is this? What's going on. Sienna? What's happening. She sits there silent, not a word. Doctor can you tell me what's happening please! He sits at his desk you know the way doctors do, he turns to me and says, " so today we carried out the scan of your unborn child now at 28 weeks we check how well the baby is growing, wether the baby is smaller than average or larger" I'm sitting there thinking ok, get to the point. "On the scan we noticed an abnormality" what abnormality the baby is ok right? I look at sienna I could see tears starting to build up in her eyes. " Its sienna we are concerned about" what's wrong with her?

Ash takes a pause.

ASH (CONT'D)

The doctor looks at me yeah, stone old in the eye. I didn't avert my gaze at all. He looks at me and says " sienna has cervical cancer" I felt instantly sick, my eyes glazed over, the lights to bright to look at. By this time sienna is crying her eyes out. And shes looking at me. Looking at me for

reassurance for me to step up and take charge. But I cant, I couldn't believe what I had heard. I look back at the doctor, I don't even argue what he's just told me I just look at him and ask, so what does this mean for the baby? What does this mean for sienna?

Ash slumps back into his seat.

ASH (CONT'D)

"We are going to have to perform an early c section. Now a normal pregnancy runs around 40 weeks. The risk is, if we opt to have an early c section at around 30 weeks you run the risk of major complications with the babies organs and respiratory system. Not to mention brain damage" and if we don't opt into doing this? "Well the 2nd option would be to let the pregnancy run its course, and attempt to deliver the baby normally, this however means it will delay the treatment we can offer to sienna"

Ash holds his head in his hands.

ASH (CONT'D)

I know that means losing her, but if we deliver the baby now there's no promise things will be ok.

He then gets off his chair.

ASH (CONT'D)

We decide to go for an emergency c section the baby is taken out, I don't hear a cry. The nurses take the baby away, sienna is tired and empty. I feel numb, no words no expressions. The chemotherapy can now start.

Ashden goes silent. And turns the chair into a different position and re arranges his clothes. To signify time has passed

ASH (CONT'D)

i wish there was a book that came with the birth of a baby, like when the baby is born a dummies guide to parenthood is handed to you as well. Being a single parent is hard. To be honest its everything in one. There are things you realize when you got a child.

- You will find it maddening how few men's rooms have changing tables. Seriously why isn't this a thing?

And the absolute worst one, over all is no one told me id have to dress up as a princess!

Ash shakes his head and lets out a big sigh

"Women are generally better at some things than men. They tend to be, dare I say it, more structured, better organized. Ironing for example: I iron on the basis of what is needed at that moment, whereas sienna would always do the ironing in advance. Same with washing. I'll leave it until there are several full loads back-logged, whereas sienna would tend to do it as she went along. When sienna, and I were together, I'd make the money and she'd remember to pay the bills. Suddenly all that changed; now I have to manage the house, my own life and Mali. Sometimes I feel incredibly emotional under the pressure, but I don't feel I can talk to my mates about it. In the past year, I've only broken down in front of my best mate once, and that's when things have been really bad.

The amazing job mothers do in two-parent families often goes unrecognized by men. When I speak to fathers about the work involved, they often look at me as if to say: what does it involve? There doesn't seem to be a register of the decisions you have to make as a parent, and the incredible amount of time and head space that involves.

For women, it's a very natural thing to be nurturing and to comfort a child when it falls over. For a man, it's a different dynamic. Fathers tend to be able to do that caring, all-consuming parental role for the weekend and then go back to focus on their job. It's a very different proposition when you're the sole carer and at any given time need to deal with any number of demands.

When my wife was with us, I found

planning our weekend adventures exciting. When I became the sole carer, planning, cooking, navigating and packing became a much more daunting prospect. As a single father you feel spread very thinly with all the roles you have to perform. Planning all the decisions about your child's education, and which after-school activity would be best without a mother to consult with, makes these choices much more difficult. The dynamics of two parents means you back each other up - daddy takes over when mummy has had enough. That's simply not possible when you're on your own.

The most difficult thing about being a dad on your own is the silly stuff, like not being able to do your daughter's hair in a French plait, or going shopping for her and struggling to figure out the kind of things she'd want at different stages in her life. It's also tough being the only one setting the boundaries and giving her stability on a daily basis.

Ash gets up

ASH (CONT'D)

But I am trying, and I will succeed, I won't become a dead beat dad. I'd give my life to see Mali succeed, and your mum, she did give her life for you! So you know you're special kiddo. So let's move forward, onto our next venture.