

## Appearances

Barbie ate green peppers all day. She'd first heard of the life-changing pepper-based diet from an old school friend who'd recently connected with her on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The woman looked fabulous - she'd grown older, they all had, but her childhood friend had aged in the way a closed bunch of flowers unfolds in the sunlight and blooms into unquestionable beauty. This paragon of perfection was Midge, and she represented just the type of person Barbie collected. Midge attributed her blossoming to the multi-pepper detox diet, swearing she followed its instruction to the letter for one week in every month. She commenced with green, working her way through the rainbow of available capsicums and spicing up alternate days with chillies of varying strength.

Three days on the diet left Barbie lacking the energy to take her usual power walk to the nearest store to replenish her supplies of the recommended fruits, despite the shop being just half a mile away. Instead, she opted to drive her Volkswagen Beetle, purchased for its shiny pink bodywork which photographed well for Instagram. She popped open the boot of the car to deposit her fabric shopping bags and from the corner of her eye spotted a bright object. Pushing random items - shoes, umbrella, car tools and blankets - out of the way, she located a shiny trinket, a diamond bracelet. A diamond bracelet that wasn't hers.

The offending piece of jewellery spat out tiny beams of light as she held it up against the early spring sunlight. Could it be she'd bought it and forgotten? No, this looked expensive, and she didn't spend vast amounts of her hard-earned cash on pretty things; that's what men were for. The train of thought reminded her of Ken, her occasional suitor and full-time over-achieving high earner. He could be guaranteed to provide sweet somethings, gourmet food and entry to the best events alongside an unhealthy dollop of dullness. And while he was necessary, Barbie did wonder if the trade-off was worth it.

She'd not spoken to him since beginning the pepper detox diet - even London didn't have an abundance of Michelin starred pepper restaurants. However, what she did recall was Ken borrowing the car one evening to drive home when his Porsche broke down. She laughed at the memory of his discomfort at sitting in what he considered to be a go-cart girlie vehicle. Barbie wondered at the time why he'd not called a minicab, or an executive car rather than be seen in the pink machine.

Her mind ran through the possibilities and landed on the two most probable. Firstly, Ken had taken one of his Insta-fans out for a "run", or secondly, he'd bought it for her and lost it when he borrowed the car. Either way, it was finders' keepers. She sighed. No matter how much he

protested his love for her or bought her extravagant gifts, she was always left with the feeling that Ken and his picture-perfect life was plastic. Shiny, blemish free, pliable. How much longer could she keep up this act?

At first, when she'd been approached to take on the contract she jumped at the chance. Who wouldn't? Money more than sufficient to maintain a good lifestyle and keep an appearance of success, and a London house the size she could never afford otherwise. In return for wealth, all they required of her was to post the highlights of her perfect life on a plethora of social media platforms. The terms of the contract predetermined her friends, the clothes she wore, the trends she tried to set and follow, even the food she ate - the pepper detox was going down a storm.

Barbie never left the house without for makeup or something worthy of being photographed. That's why she got her dog Tanner, an adorable golden retriever she walked whatever the weather on Tottenham marshes, smiling and greeting fellow dog walkers. Everyone loved a cute dog photo. She knew cats were more popular than canines, but her allergy to their fur prevented her from adding one to her list of accessories.

And then there was Ken. The perfect weekend boyfriend, with his chiselled looks, his gym ready body and outfit for every occasion, he was the man of any woman's dreams, or so his packaging said. But in her case, he was turning out to be a bit of a nightmare. She threw the diamond trinket back into the cluttered boot of the car, closed the hatch and continued on her mission to retrieve peppers. Driving down Broad Lane towards the numerous shops on West Green Road, she watched passers-by and envied their freedom to be who they wanted to be. Those women with families, clothes that reflected their personalities, quirks and interests. She read about some of them online; their lives appeared rich. They had interesting, fulfilling jobs like painting, writing, setting up businesses, bringing up children, journalism, running boutique cafes and trendy marketplaces. Some worked in shops, styled hair or worked on the underground. She wasn't naive enough to think that they without problems, ups and downs, emotional upsets and challenging life events. But there was something different about these women, something about their relationships with each other, the friendship, the camaraderie and the sense of togetherness. It was the modern-day equivalent to the spirit of the Blitz.

Packing up the pink beetle, Barbie took the opportunity to sneak in a selfie in front of a Turkish grocery shop, one of many on the road.

#Shopping #Local #PepperDetoxDiet #citylife

She followed with a shot of her bag full of green peppers as she left the shop, hoping they'd get as many likes as Midge's morning online posts. While scanning accounts and messages she noticed an image from an Instagram newbie, an account named Women in Tottenham. She was a woman, she lived in Tottenham. Perhaps this was a way for her to make a change, to be both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time.

As she stared at the account considering whether to click through to their website an alert popped up on her phone. Ken. She sighed. Guzzling down a pepper to fill the hole in her stomach, Barbie headed off to see her plastic boyfriend, but not before following Women in Tottenham's social accounts, promising herself she'd check them out tomorrow.