

His girlfriend was already waiting in the bar when he walked into the wall of sound which demarcated the streets of Stoke Newington from the interior of the hipster hangout. Voices mingled with the beat from this week's hyped trending track, the sound of craft beer poured from boutique-branded bottles and the low hum of an urgent need for acceptance. Not for the first time, Ken considered growing a beard. The plethora of male facial hair grooming products added to the attraction of not having to shave twice a day to maintain the baby-faced skin on his chin and cheeks. However, he had signed up for the hipster option, which specified a top knot or geeky specs, but no beard. He wasn't a geeky glasses type of guy so opted for the sculptured long-hair. He rocked the look.

Hands waved at him from a corner table of the crowded hipster-hangout. Ken steeled himself before approaching, wondering if he could keep up the pretence of being in a loving relationship with Barbie, a woman who never failed to irk him with her level of perfection. Perfect hair, on-trend clothes, and that super-skinny figure. Her specification didn't mesh with his hipster guidance document, leaving him feeling mismatched and undervalued. Ken pondered requesting a more interesting model but worried it might get him booted off the programme, and he did so enjoy driving her pink car.

"Ken," said Barbie, rising from her wooden stool and offering up her cheeks to be air kissed.

"Barbie."

"This place is sick, isn't it?"

Ken screwed up his face. "Jeez Barbie! No one says 'sick' anymore and you're not a teen queen."

"Irony, Ken, irony."

"Do you even know what irony is?"

Barbie stiffened, adopting a sneer that stole the plastic beauty from her features. "You're so up yourself. What's with you tonight?"

"Sorry. It's just, well, don't you ever want to grow a beard?"

"A beard? Really Ken, why would you ask me something so ridiculous? I couldn't grow a beard if I tried. Is that a snide comment about my upper-lip? Cause I know it's due a bleaching."

Ken bit his lip. He did so a little harder than he'd intended and grimaced at the hint of iron-tasting blood. "It's a metaphor. I'm supposed to be a hipster, but I'm not allowed a beard. A big, thick bushy beard isn't permitted, yet it feels more like me than the chiselled smooth-skinned version. I don't know. Ignore me. I'm being stupid."

The pair sat in silence, not meeting each other's eyeline, until their impasse was broken by a surely looking waitress with an iPad asking what they wanted to drink. As she departed, Barbie placed her hand onto of Ken's.

"I get what you're saying. What we've signed up for is madness. If I'm being honest I've been wondering how to break out of it." She paused, searching his face for a reaction. Ken's face remained blank and plastic, the way he'd been trained to. Inside, however, his stomach churned, and his thoughts fought each other for attention. Could he trust Barbie? Had she been instructed to test his loyalty to the firm?

"Really? Isn't that impossible? The contract is watertight." He hoped he'd struck the right tone with his answer; interested but ambiguous.

"Perhaps this isn't the best place for us to have this conversation. Anyone could be listening," she replied, mirroring his own level of anxiety.

“You’re right. Let’s take some snaps and let the world think we’re headed into town. I’ve a minicab driver who’s discreet and won’t let on we’ve gone home instead.”

Barbie adjusted her phone to selfie mode, repositioned her features and lined up a series of appropriate hashtags. #CityNightlife #DanceTheNightAway #Clubbin #PerfectBoyfriend #TrueLove

“Your place or mine?” she asked.

Twenty minutes later, they were perched on the uncomfortable but smart-looking sofa in the open plan living/kitchen area of Ken’s penthouse apartment. The building came with executive level concierge service, a fully kitted out gym and saltwater swimming pool in the basement, and a premium rent. The contact with the firm made it possible for Ken to live here, regardless of his more than ample salary he drew down from his Old Street situated tech start up. Ken knew little about IT, but he employed people who did and shone in the glory of their coding, design and marketing endeavours.

With the help of the best bottle opener money could buy, Ken uncorked a bottle of organic red wine and poured them both a glass.

“Look,” he said to Barbie. “Before I say any more I need to be sure this isn’t a trap.”

“You want to frisk me for wires?” asked Barbie, her tone both sarcastic and flirty. Ken raised an eyebrow but stayed silent. He’d already said enough to incriminate himself.

“Okay, I get it. I’m not a spy, not trying to catch you out or prove some breach of contract. I’ve got as much to lose as you by talking about this. But if you want proof, look at this.” She scrolled through images in a hidden folder on her phone before handing it to him.

Ken suppressed a laugh. “You have no make-up on. You have no make-up on in public, and your clothes.”

Barbie snatched the phone back. “Don’t be judging, it’s unattractive. You asked for proof and now you’ve got it. You’re not the only one with questions you know.”

“What are yours then?”

Pitching her hand into the latest designer handbag to join her collection, she pulled out a bracelet of sparkling jewels. “How did this end up in the back of my car? Did you buy it for someone else? Not that I care.”

He shook his head, tapped his foot on the polished wooden floor of the perfect apartment.

“So, how did it get there?” asked Barbie.

Ken mumbled a reply which took all his nerve to squeeze out. He stared into an imaginary distance, scared to meet her gaze, but failing to notice she hadn’t heard his words.

“It’s not such a difficult question, is it? At first, I wasn’t bothered. After all, who cares if you’re sleeping around. But then I began to wonder what else you might be hiding and I’m sick of all the lying, the pretence, the energy it takes to live this life we’ve indentured ourselves to.”

“I bought it for myself.” The second time the words came out with the speed of an amphetamine; rapid, vital, unstoppable. This time Barbie heard him.

“What? You bought yourself a diamond bracelet?”

“Yes. I adore shiny things, my favourite colour is pink, I lust after men with beards and when I’m alone, late at night, I dress in clothes I’ve stolen from your wardrobe.” He poured more wine as Barbie echoed his words in more tentative manner.

“But I thought you were so dull,” she said when she managed to gather together a tiny portion of her thoughts. “And look at you. The perfect specimen of maleness.”

“Only if you are an eight-year old girl who’s into dolls and still believes in the fairy tale of a world where she can live happily ever after.”

“But what I don’t get is why you’re doing this. Why not wait until they invent a gay Ken?” They both laughed. That was never going to happen, just like Ken was never going to grow a beard after the disastrous Ken shaving doll experiments of the 1980s.

“I need the money. Racked up loads of debt. Had a gambling habit that raged out control. And it seemed like an easy solution. Three years of pretending but unlimited resources, success, a beautiful place to live with the option to buy at the end of the contract. But now...”

“But now it’s a nightmare. Now you’re stuck living a lie, supressing the real you.” Ken nodded. “Exactly, so do you really think there’s a way out of all this?”