

## What the inspector saw

In new art-shop persona Ken had to act at least ten years older than he really was. Urbane and cultured, dapper, open to other interpretations. In the shop this was easy, art lent itself to quiet contemplation and gentle exploration, and by implying he was established he could charge more. WPC Rollings was twenty two. Was she looking for the twenty-four year old Ken or the forty year old Ken?

What was he looking for? Shagging a muscular copper and going to copper's parties, or sharing an afternoon in bed with an elegant lady then an expensive meal and the opera? He wasn't sure. On the basis of 'bird-in-the-hand' he would try shagging and playing hunt the brain-cell. They couldn't all be knuckle-draggers surely.

WPC Rollings was on the ten 'till six shift plodding and finding things of trivial interest in the precinct or watching the tramps on the promenade until called by a squawk on the radio to scoot off on her mountain bike to deal with a shoplifter or old lady fallen over or anything that might drift her way... Yes! 'Drift' That was a good image. Events like driftwood... Floating out there unseen, coming from somewhere unknown, pushed up the beach then left there for us to stumble over them. How to paint it? That was a puzzle. In a minute he had it! WPC Rollings washed up on the beach. Hmm. Perhaps he'd better not make it a dead body but a smiling mermaid. No! He liked the body. Drained flesh with every vestige of everything removed. Every plumpness slightly deflated, her hair a mat of oiled feathers. Body, naked, left by the waves however they liked surrounded by untouched sand. Three pm. Damn the clock! He was in love! He needed to sketch the shore not wait for the p'ting of customers. He wrote a sign and stuck it on the door. 'Artist on beach. Join me there!' then collected his outdoor kit. The light was fantastic, the smell was proper seaside 'seaweed and rotting crabs', the tiny frumps of little waves as they breathed their last before being sucked back in a gentle shushh framed his picture-making mood perfectly.

He was determined to capture the overlapping pattern of foam floods as they tried to climb up then along the beach then gave up. The constant movement and variation made it difficult. They left ghostly fringes picked out with almost microscopic debris as the tide went out. Sand was scooped out in little moats around the larger stones leaving tear-stains to drain them. What were those tiny flecks of black like beetle wing-cases? No matter, they were once something else and were now just particles left for a few moments in a pattern of fate.

After her shift WPC Rollings found Ken on the beach cavorting with a five-foot five, white, middle aged, middle class woman, wearing a brown quilted top and brown slacks. Waving his arms and stabbing like the conductor at last night of the proms, he directed her attention to details on the beach then his sketch block. He swooped a ballet of running up the beach then falling flat then lying there draining away. He needed no lessons for this stage. She kept back to watch. Ken wasn't a poof weirdo like the lads said – he was different – and special. This was magic she daren't interrupt. Ken had the woman lay down on the sand and as he mimed waves swooshing her up the beach each time she became a limper version of the previous body. This was a bit

creepy but artists were – um – special. She didn't know if she was attracted to him for his subversiveness or sparkling curiosity or his maturity – or what?

His visit to another world was brought back to earth when the lovely WPC Rollings appeared. He realised what the time was and thoughts of guilty pleasure fought with memories of a fantastic few hours too intimate to describe. Without a thought he introduced WPC Rollings to the lady interested in painting and her husband. The mirrored pairing of couples was obvious to Ken but he didn't know if she saw it. They retreated to the dark shop and tasted each other. He was salty and gritty, she was soft and softer.

"I'm covered in sand. I'm going upstairs to have a quick shower."

"I'll come upstairs with you my man. I'll have a shower after."

Harry wasn't a virgin but this was her initiation into adult sex. Two people in a competition to satisfy each other. They were satisfied, doubts forgotten. Arms around each other feeling new hollows, finding new hopes and confidence. For Ken, the experiment was a success. For Harry, to have her was her goal.

Hunger drove them out. He made her pay on the basis that she'd had a days wages but he'd made a profit of ten pounds without counting heating, lighting and rates. This made her happy. Really bubbling happy – Somebody to look after. She was a bit shocked as scraping overtime to pay for her next car was something practical but he was a... She didn't know. Another time. This was just lovely. He knew all the french words on the menu and made her mouth tingle with the taste of whatever it was with whatever herbs she'd never heard of. Ken knew how to make knowing two things sound like you knew everything. They had a romantic time in the scented gloom. He insisted on accompanying her home to her parents in good time to get up next morning sober. What a gentleman!

The next day Ken began his 'washed-up body' piece. It would have to be at least a metre square. Better make it a bit more: 'Big idea – big canvas'. Should he make an entry on his blog yet? Hmm. See what happened. There could be a number of profitable variations but he'd start with his first idea. He got stuck on the centrepiece, WPC Rollings face. He wanted to see it in bare skylight. Would that be her 'police' hair or 'woman's' hair? Police of course! It all made sense. The Eastshire constabulary draining away her femininity. Putting her in trousers ballooned with bum and hips. But was that a different painting? He wasn't getting confused but there was a lot more in this than he'd first thought.

He managed to catch WPC Rollings bright in short-sleeve uniform, cycle helmet and bike outside the police headquarters returning for lunch. (He hated bicycles. They were impossible to draw, and what was the point?) "I can afford to buy you a sandwich." he said. This threat to her canteen routine was on the scale of a terrorist attack level red, then Harry recalled the well wrapped memory of last night. Hell yes! It was her lunch break! She was free to be with Ken if she wanted. Ken the poof painter, bent as a nine bob note. She held her hand out and they walked along the precinct happy that they

had a few minutes to be themselves.

After work Harry went to the shop. They kissed and hugged in the gloom. "I've got something to tell you Ken. The Inspector saw us holding hands and gave me a dressing down."

"None of his business. What did you say?"

"Nothing. He was very rude about you."

"He was rude about me so he could hurt you. Did he hurt you?" He held her protectively.

"Yes I suppose I was angry inside. There was nothing I could do." The close-up look of worried hope in her face sent an instant chill through Ken. That was the face for the body on the shore. He tried to breathe normally.

"Put up with bullying. It's all part of being a man in a man's world. Take the knocks and pass it on. You smell lovely dear. Undo your hair, you're not Harry you're Harriet."

"I haven't got a grip it will go everywhere."

"You can have one of Jen's. You said you went for a run to get over anger. Shall we go jogging the prom then have some fish and chips?"

"Who's Jen?"

"I'll tell you later. Nothing to worry about dear – Harriet."

You said you painted it away."

"And I will – I promise."

Two days later a painting in the style of a Donald McGill postcard appeared in the window entitled 'What the inspector saw'. In the viewfinder of a Mutoscope are the binocularised middles of a couple holding hands. She's wearing a saucy police skirt and he's suggestively carrying a baguette overflowing with salad. Looking at this is a sunburn-red police inspector so apoplectic that his eyebrows have jumped off his face into the air! He's got words as well: "Disgusting! ... Salad!". Look closer, note the sweat and body posture and there's the distinct impression he's aroused, and then there's just enough clue to suggest with malice, self-arousal!

Ken took it to the office of the evening paper with a carefully written attack headed 'Prudes on patrol' on the men-only canteen culture of Hastebourne's police, a suggestion that Inspector Garsdale might want to go on one of his own anti-bullying courses finishing with statistics showing a rise in local crime.

The police tried to transfer WPC Rollings to another district but it was no contest as the national media automatically supported a girl with nice legs. Harriet's makeup was done for her by a real expert. What happened when Harriet met Jen is another story.