

Sollicito
By Charlie Cochrane

Sollicito

Do you ever think you've got problems? Well, maybe you have, but you should try getting your head around mine.

I'm gay. Okay, that's not such a big crisis these days; not over here in the UK, anyway. I mean, we've got legislation and civil partnerships and gay characters on the television, just about every programme, just about every night. Actually, maybe that last bit should go in the problems department, because they usually end up murderer or murdered.

I'm English, and I follow the lads at rugby. That seems to vary from being a problem to being the best thing in the world, usually depending on the state of Billy's legs or Owen's cramp.

I haven't got a bloke at the moment. That's definitely a problem, because I'm a red-blooded male and I'm not into one-nighters or five-finger jobs any more. It's like all the women at work say, the ones who are getting desperate, "Why do you never meet kind, handsome, single men? Because they've all got boyfriends of their own." Same applies this side of the fence, girls.

I'm not yet worried enough to go looking in the lonely hearts ads. Okay, I do read them, but that's like looking in the baker's window. You're not necessarily going to go in and scoff all the cakes, are you? Anyway, every twenty-something bloke in the newspaper seems to be looking for sixty-something guys so I'm too young by...by plenty.

I haven't got a face like a mandrill's arse, I'm house trained, I've got a good job and I definitely come in the "Good sense of humour" category. So why haven't I got some guy hanging off my arm? It's the hair. And the teeth. Not that I'm bald, or have a bad nineteen eighties' perm. Or dentures. It's just that I'm a shapeshifter, and it's not all it's cracked up to be.

The bloody cinema has a lot to answer for, in terms of getting our image skewed; you might think it's really glamorous, turning into a wild animal, but the truth's a lot more prosaic. Think about it—how can it be any fun when you've met this really cute bloke and you're just at the "standing outside the bar, dangling your umbrella and wondering if he's going to say, 'Your place or mine?' stage," and you realise you're about to start sprouting hair from unlikely places. The only thing you can do is make your excuses and leave.

Now, it mightn't be so bad if I was a lycanthrope, because there's something dead sexy about a wolf, but I'm not. They're ten a penny, frankly, while there are apparently only two of *us* known of in the

whole of Europe and barely a dozen worldwide. Somebody explained it to me once; it's about genetics. As I said, Lycanthropes are sexy and they have no problem reproducing themselves—especially the night of the full moon when they're at it like dogs in heat. Which they would be. It's not as simple for us. You need to carry both recessive genes and the correct markers on other chromosomes to become a were-sloth. See, I told you my problems are worse than yours, and when you stop laughing you might understand.

Sollicitas

Got over the joke? Right.

The big change—it's not predictable for us, like it is with wolves. I mean, they've only got to look at the calendar and Bob's your uncle. Organise their social lives properly and no-one's the wiser. Nobody's bothered about doing a lot of research into what triggers the Xenanthropy—I've even had to make up a word for changing into a sloth—because it's not even sexy enough for scientists to take an interest in. I've always thought the shifting has got to be due to an environmental trigger, such as a chemical in the atmosphere or a particular wavelength of light hitting me, but I've got no way of knowing when it's going to strike.

I usually get a sort of pre-warning aura, like you do with migraine, so I can get myself home before I start wanting to climb up the lampposts or along the phone wires. I suppose I could just lock myself in one of the loos at work and then creep out through the windows, but I don't want to risk being caught and carted off to the zoo. Again. Don't ask.

I've got a blind date tonight. One of the guys I watch The Exiles with of a Saturday met this bloke at a party and for some reason—three pints of Guinness' worth of reason, probably—thinks we might “click”. So I'm putting on the best bib and tucker in a minute. And giving my teeth an extra clean, just in case he turns out to have a bit more allure than the last date had. *He* would have made Dan Cole look like Tom Daley. Excuse me while I fantasise.

I'm sorry if I've got you worrying now about whether *whatever it is* kicks in tonight; it's because I'm all of a divvy doo dah and panic's infectious. Imagine the scene for me, as I'm trying hard not to. We've got past the “take it further or not” stage and we're at my flat, looking out over the river and wondering how long it'll be before his tongue's down my throat. Then “it” strikes and I'm getting the urge to crawl along the picture rail. Not pleasant.

Right, wish me luck as I wave you goodbye and I'll report back later. Roger (I wish) and out.

Sollicitat

It went all right, the date. Surprisingly all right, in the, “didn’t quite get to tongues down the throat but hugged and agreed to meet again,” way. He—Graeme—isn’t a bad looking guy at all. Blond, where I’m Titian (I know it’s Titian, it said so on the box), and a couple of inches taller than me. Built like a flanker whereas I’m more your centre type, and he has a brain. Glory be. I mean, I’m as enthusiastic as the next man for a bit of eye candy, but you want someone you can talk to over the breakfast table, when it’s the next morning and you both look distinctly worse for wear.

Well, maybe *you* don’t all want that. I do.

While Graeme and I never got as far as next morning—because he’d been told only that afternoon that he had to fly up to Manchester, crack of dawn the next day—I think he’d be the sort of guy I wouldn’t be desperate to boot out of the flat and conveniently lose the number of later. And then accidentally forget to return any of his texts.

Maybe that flight to Manchester was a blessing in disguise, because I’d not been home ten minutes and I got *the urge*. Having no choice in the matter, it wasn’t long before I’m was on top of the wardrobe and swinging from the chandelier, but with none of the connotations your smutty minds are giving that.

Perhaps I’ve got the shifting out of my system for a while and I’ll be safe when I cook him dinner on Friday evening.

Graeme admitted he was a bit of a worrier, and I suspect he’s also a bad flyer as he seemed to be getting a bit *agitato* over the Manchester trip. Maybe if we started seeing more of each other, and yes, I do mean that in more ways than one, we could keep each other company in the fretting stakes. Trouble shared is a trouble halved and all that, although if we were both sharing and halving our troubles we would end up with the same number we started with. You do the maths because my head aches.

That’s one of the other problems with shifting; you get a muzzy head the next day and the most peculiar feeling in your stomach, like you’ve been eating something absolutely vile. Please do *not* look up sloths on Wikipedia and see what Linnaeus’s Two-toed sloth has allegedly been eating. I was traumatised for days after reading that.

I do remember most of what goes on when I’m in slothly mode, but I’m always concerned I’ve blanked out the less savoury bits. And, to spawn a cliché, I *won’t* be blanking out any part of our dinner date, because I don’t think Graeme has any less savoury bits. I hope.

Sollicitamus

Dinner last night was smashing. Yes, I know self-praise is no recommendation, but Graeme says I can cook for him any time, so I must have done something right. Nice beef casserole with a rich sauce, plenty of mash to soak up the juices and some green veg on the side. Bottle of Chateau Cissac to wash it down and we were happy bunnies.

I know what you want to ask, because I've sussed out by now that you're a prurient lot. *Did* we? Depends what you mean by "did".

He didn't stay the night, because he has a rugby game up in Oxford today—early kick off so they can watch the England game afterwards—but we used the bed because it's bigger and a bit more civilised than the settee. Now, if you want to be figurative and look at what happened on the bed in terms of the journey from here to Oxford, we got to about Junction 6 of the M40.

It was a pretty good expedition, too, sticking to the slow lane and taking turns doing the driving, if you get me. That's as far as I can go with the metaphors. Just take my word that it was one of the best journeys I've ever taken.

Nothing of a slow-moving-mammal nature occurred while he was here, which was a weight off my mind. Clearly, if we carry on dating then at some point I'm going to have to confess all and hope he doesn't run screaming for the hills. I suppose the Chilterns, which is where he comes from, count as hills.

Anyway, in the short term there's nothing to be anxious about. Except we're both a bit nervous about today, because neither of us want him getting his handsome head kicked in when he's in the middle of a ruck. And we've both got an awful sinking feeling that the French are going to stuff the England rugby team, out in Paris. Allez Angleterre!

Sollicitatis

Graeme had me over for Sunday lunch today. I was a bit concerned when I rang the doorbell and a woman answered, but it was just his mum, popping in with his dad in tow, en route to roast beef and Yorkshire pudding at the golf club. I didn't think I'd be meeting the "in-laws" (okay, I'm being presumptuous, but a boy has to dream) this early. They seemed like a nice couple, not overly concerned that I was a Danny rather than an Annie.

Graeme had a big grin all over his gob, partly, I hope, because he was quite proud of showing me off to his folks and partly because we—by which I mean England—stuffed Les Bleus yesterday. We dissected the match, him, me and his dad, while his mum stood by looking impatient. Dad got

dragged off to the club which left Graeme and me to have a pre-prandial snog and discuss whether Morgan Parra is cuter than Maro Itoje. Jury's out on that one. Need to consider the evidence further. We were just finishing off a really nice piece of salmon he'd done in a parmesan breadcrumb crust when I realised he was looking at me a bit peculiar. Not in the, "Let's skip dessert and go straight up to bed," sort of way, either. Sort of shock and awe. For some reason I thought to look at my hands and they were sprouting hair. Nails were inching longer and starting to curl, as well.

Bugger. I'd not had any warning, no inkling that 'the change' was on the way.

I leapt out of my chair, grabbed my coat and was out of his front door like I had a firework up my backside. I think I said something about food poisoning from a dodgy kebab I'd had the night before, and how I didn't want to have to inflict it on his classic white toilet suite, but there wasn't much time to say anything, really.

The rate the hair was sprouting I needed to get my car down some quiet country lane and just see it out. No good driving when you're a sloth—for one thing your reaction time's shot to pieces. Worse than when you've taken too much cough medicine. Last thing I remember seeing of Graeme was through my rear view mirror, him standing at the roadside and watching me drive away. I didn't look too long as it wasn't the last memory I wanted of him.

He hasn't rung, which is no surprise given the fact that I've had my mobile off ever since I started to change back earlier this evening. I'm a coward, I know, but what else can I do? I really thought there was a chance he'd be "the one"—yeah, I realise we've barely known each other a handful of days, but if you can believe in were-sloths you can believe in love at first sight. And now it's all screwed up. Big time. You do the worrying for me this time because I've not got an ounce of strength left.

Bugger, bugger, bugger, bugger, sod.

Sollicitant

Graeme rang me at the office today—he must have got the number off my mate. He was really concerned about me; said he'd rung half a dozen times last night but decided I'd turned the phone off. Said he'd have done the same, which was an odd remark to make. He wants to meet tonight, straight after work. Says we need to talk.

I suppose he wants an explanation and I suppose I owe him one, running out like Cinderella when he'd gone to the trouble of putting together such a cracking meal. Guess I'll have to bite the bullet, although whether I'll stick to the food poisoning story or make up some other cock and bull tale, I'm not sure.

He said he'd told his mum and dad what had happened—oh joy—and they were worried about me, too. Apparently they'd "clicked" with me straight off (click, click everywhere, I'm like a pair of bloody knitting needles) and were looking forward to inviting me round for dinner.

Anyway, at least when I see Graeme tonight I'll be left with a final memory of him that's better than a fuzzy shot in a rear view mirror. I need something to warm me in my lonely old age. Yeah, I'm getting maudlin and can you blame me?

What a fucking mess.

Gaudeamus

Well, here's a turn up for the books. It's three in the morning—I'm going to be totally knackered for work today but I don't give a toss—and Graeme just left. Before you ask, "Did we?" we *did*. And it was brilliant. I mean just mind-blowing, okay?

I had my story all ready. I'd been on the net and found something called bacteraemia which really knocks you for six and comes on in an instant then passes over and you're fit as a flea again. I was going to say I'd got it because of my root canal treatment.

Only I never got to say any of it, because he dragged us off to a quiet corner of the bar almost as soon as he saw me. I should have known something was up by the way he was so...unconcerned, if that's the word. None of the awkwardness I'd expected. He said I had to shut up and listen to him, which was rich as I hadn't even had the chance to say anything.

All he wanted was a simple answer—had I spent Sunday afternoon moving very slowly and resisting the urge to climb up telegraph poles? I must have managed to say yes, because he hugged me and said that was brilliant and it proved there were at least five of us in Europe and I was half way into an argument about how some bloke reckoned he'd categorically proven there were only two were-sloths in the whole of the EC before I realised the importance of what he was saying. *Us*.

I finally got it into my head to clarify that he, too, had shifted shape on Sunday. When he said "yes" I almost kissed him, even though it wasn't a gay bar and we might have got our heads kicked in.

We went straight home; didn't even pass go, or stop at either the off licence or the chippy. Home, bed, you can guess the rest. Cheese on toast afterwards and a couple of bottles of beer. Meeting again tomorrow and ad infinitum after that, with any luck.

And do you know what? It was his mother who had organised the whole thing, through my mate from the rugby. I'd kill the pair of them if I wasn't so happy. She'd met *my* mother on a ladies golfing weekend and when they'd both had a Dubonnet too many they started pouring out their

hearts. Lo and behold they discovered their little boys (I'm twenty seven and mum still thinks I'm eleven and a half) shared a couple of secrets in common.

And I could have sworn she didn't know about the sloth bit. See, all that received wisdom was right. They're the last people we confess to and the first to know. I just hope she doesn't know what we did before the cheese on toast "afterwards".

Postscript

"Irish! Irish! Irish!"

As a chant goes, it has the advantage of being easy to learn. Although, when we were in the Premiership, the wonderfully ear-splitting rugby Premiership, it was too easy to confuse with opposition calls like "Tigers! Tigers! Tigers!" Still, the guys out on the field won't be bothered, when they're focussed on trying to beat the crap out of each other in the name of winning another match.

Nice to see Irish ahead for once. Getting relegated last season means we're winning a lot more matches this one. I thought we were going to get a try almost on the stroke of half time, but the ball got lost forward when the referee—some young lad who's a lot easier on the eye than most of the breed—blew and I could have a good stretch.

Graeme—who's also easier on the eye than most—stands up, easing his leg into position. Walking plasters are a great invention, especially for silly sods who break their metatarsals. It means they can come and watch the game, even though we had to bring a plastic carrier bag to stick his leg in if it rains or if some idiot spills his Guinness. It's going to be interesting to see what happens to that plaster when he shifts shape.

"Good game," he says, nodding. "Long time since I've been to see a game on a Saturday."

"You needn't have gone to such extremes just to get to this one." I tap the plaster. "Couldn't you have told your team your GP had recommended a week's rest from playing?"

"Pillock. Anyway, that would have been lying. You never lie to the lads."

"Really?" My eyes must be rolling like sailors on shore leave. "So you've told them about me?"

"I have, actually. Told one of the lads I'd picked up a bit of alright. He asked what she was like and I said she was a he." Graeme grins. He's got the sort of smile that goes right through you and settles in your nether regions. Which is no use when you're surrounded by five thousand people.

"Was that how you ended up with your broken foot? One of them beat you up?"

“No. The foot came first. The discussion about you was when I was in Casualty waiting to be seen. Carl had come along to give me moral support. Only right, as he’d been the idiot who trod on my foot in the ruck.”

“You need to remember to tie your laces more securely in future.” Only an idiot like Graeme could lose a boot just as fifteen stone of lock forward is about to bear his size elevens down on said idiot’s toes. Still, I can’t help worrying. “What did Carl say? About us?”

“That you were probably too good for me.”

I shouldn’t have been so concerned. Most rugby players have few issues about blokes being gay; they’re man enough not to feel their sexuality can be called into question just because they aren’t homophobic. Unlike in a certain game played with a round ball which will remain nameless.

“He’s got sense, then. Maybe I should have a pint with him. He could tell me all about your faults. The ones I haven’t worked out for myself. Ow!” Rugby programmes can make pretty solid weapons if they’re rolled up and applied to the back of the neck. And I can’t retaliate, can I? Bad sport to whack an injured bloke.

“I don’t know why I put up with you. Have you gone and got the Bovrils in yet?”

“No. Given that I didn’t know I had to go and get them in.” Shifter maybe, but telepath definitely not. “And also given that the queue will be a mile long. You should have asked me to go five minutes before half time.”

“That would have been wanton cruelty, with your lot camped on the opposition’s line. Anyway, you wouldn’t have gone, not with the Irish itching to run in a try. And if they had, and you’d missed it, you’d never have forgiven me.”

“True. Tell you what, I’ll go five minutes into the second half. Just tell the boys not to score, okay?” Graeme hoots so much at that I seriously consider breaking his other foot.

“What’s so funny?”

“Spent most of my life encouraging boys to score. You know that.”

“Pillock. Pillock who won’t be getting a Bovril.” I sit down again, to watch the half time entertainment. Always fun to see a bloke dressed as a dog trying to kick a rugby ball into a huge green dustbin.

“Why don’t any of the teams have sloth mascots?” Graeme says, settling into his seat again.

“Not sexy enough?”

“Little do they know,” he replies, which gets the old trouser department misbehaving again.

“Anyway, think about it. Sale Sloths. Doesn’t have the same ring as Sale Sharks, does it?”

“Not the same ring, but probably a more accurate description.”

Mind you, I'd love to snuggle up with that Richie Gray, shifted or not. “Did you tell Carl about the sloth bit, as well? Come out of closet? Or down from the lampshade?”

“Don't be daft. I wanted to go to Casualty, not find myself in the Psychiatric ward.” He gives my hand a quick squeeze and lowers his voice. “Useful things, walking plasters. Don't inhibit all activity.”

“We can put that hypothesis to the test later,” I say, getting up and pulling my greatcoat round me.

“Off to get the Bovrils at last?”

“Maybe.”

And it's going to be easier to hide the state of my nether regions stood in the queue...