DAVE SINGLETON

I Think I Love Him

His hair made me swoon long before I'd heard that expression. I didn't know the word "perfection," either. But when I was nine (to be precise, nine years and eight days), I grasped what it meant.

I had no adequate words then to describe how I felt when I first saw David Cassidy in *The Partridge Family,* which premiered September 25, 1970. I just knew it was the best birthday present I received that year. After a month of alluring television previews, there he was, on-screen, dressed in red velvet pants and vest with white shirt, strumming his guitar and singing onstage.

Teen magazines were quick to zero in on his unfussy yet perfectly symmetrical shag haircut, parted on the side, with beautiful chestnut-brown waves cascading over his forehead like a follicle waterfall and sweeping behind his head like sea grass in the ocean breeze of an eternal summer. His smile was easy yet complicated—I identified with the longing I saw behind it. He wore beatnik-chic bell-bottom jeans that rode low over what seemed like no hips at all. His look fell on the sartorial scale somewhere between Hardy Boys and Woodstock hippie. Often, he wore his shirt open several buttons, exposing a smooth tan chest, sometimes with a puka-shell necklace framing his throat. And his voice—so smooth and pleading, wanting to connect, openhearted but not too flashy.

I see now how this romantic ideal imprinted on my soul like the first chords of an unforgettable song rooting you to a newly

discovered desire within yourself. What I didn't know at nine was that I'd made an unassailable commitment to its enduring power, and that I would have an inchoate longing to reconnect to it, always. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

My family had recently moved back from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Alexandria, Virginia, and I was having a hard time adjusting to my new school, an uptight and conservative Episcopalian haven for boys, many of whose parents were showy and well-to-do, which mine decidedly were not. It was the kind of place that fought with all the cavalry they could muster the onslaught of liberalism in the form of a half-credit art course. With uniforms, strict policies, tough male teacher-coaches, and a smattering of bitter old nun wannabes who ruled, literally, with thick wooden yardsticks they weren't afraid to smack an errant note-passing boy's hand with, it might as well have been Catholic school. The focus was on football, math, science, and God—in that order.

I had no voice in that classroom and felt like a prisoner at home. I was the youngest of four children, the other three of whom were nearly a decade older, the three of them being whatever you'd call the WASP equivalent of Irish triplets—perhaps just ambitious. The triumvirate was born to middle-class, aspiring parents who embodied post–World War II dreams and expectations of perfection. Later, they spoke of how our father, wearing a chef's hat, manning the grill with martini in hand, would proudly exclaim, "Don't we have the life?" during weekend barbecues. It was a time when children were seen and not heard. A family's dirty laundry was safely tucked away, at least until the mid-1960s, when the 1950s' dreamy, polite suburban living experiment gave way to long-haired, outspoken children empowered by a new era of rebellion.

I didn't want revolt as much as I wanted escape. David was the bandmate I wanted to play music with after school in the garage, losing ourselves in time and chords, far away from boring homework and tense family dinners. He was the caring

older brother for whom I would have traded in my two biological ones gladly in exchange for this perfect model who'd assumed man-of-the-house reins when fictional Mr. Partridge mysteriously died, leaving the family in an economic crunch. How the dad died didn't matter to me. I was smitten with cool mom and groovy older brother running the family show.

In my experience, fathers were distracted at best and mean at worst. When my dad walked in the door after work, I gave him a wide berth and stayed in my room out of sight. From behind the closed door, I felt Pavlovian anxiety when I heard the squeaky wheels of his car pull up in the driveway and the motor make sounds like a deflating metal balloon as he turned the engine off. I'd been on the receiving end of too many harsh comments like "For God's sake, get out of my way" and silent swats as he walked in, dropped his briefcase, and headed to my parents' bedroom to change out of his suit. At dinner, his temper could rear up with the speed of a cheetah pouncing on prey. When provoked, he was prone to strike, but it wasn't the occasional physical violence that kept me wary. It was the unabated threat of it. I related—in my real and reel lives—to boys without dads. That's probably why I never bonded, as arguably so many of my peers did, with *The Brady Bunch,* another family show—albeit one with a strong, caring father—which had premiered a year before the Partridges.

Soon after we returned from Pittsburgh and *The Partridge Family* started, my family experienced seismic shifts that created a permanent sense of shakiness at home. My sister entered college and, within a year, stunned us all by getting engaged to a blond-haired, blue-eyed man who looked like a teen idol, a cross between Bobby Sherman and Shaun Cassidy, David's half-brother who became a heartthrob in his own right with his remake of the Crystals' "Da Doo Ron Ron." My brothers ran with a restless pack, occasionally leaving home for extended, mysterious periods, possibly outrunning the law. My parents were in a constant state of anxiety and

aggravation. I retreated into silence, out of the way not only of difficult Dad, but also of Mom, siblings, and potential bullying.

My siblings' overt rebellion—drugs, anger, getting suspended from school, and marrying too young—inspired my feelings of unrest and awakened furtive desires. I was egged on by *The Partridge Family*'s opening song, "C'mon Get Happy," which, each week, called out to me like Alice's beckoning mirror. As a curious and slightly desperate preteen, eager to escape my harsh black-and-white reality, I couldn't wait to bound into the magical color console. Leap into the television's looking glass is exactly what I did.

I found the courage to request sole occupation of our family TV room on Friday nights from eight to nine P.M., the first time I remember making such a bold appeal. Perhaps my parents decided to toss me this bone as an inexpensive way to create some peace and harmony. Or maybe they admired the quiet kid's taking a stand. I'll never know. But I got my wish and my time slot was sacrosanct.

First, I watched the Bradys' opening act, somewhat disdainfully. Mr. Brady was nice to his blended brood of three sons and three stepdaughters, and as I watch episodes now, I'm struck by the show's dull dialogue and banal aesthetic. The Bradys weren't wry—they weren't even wry-lite. So many of their plots revolved around how best to fit in with the popular crowd. On the other side of the suburban street, the Partridges proffered an edgy colloquial spin on familial relations and purposefully set themselves apart. I loved how the cool singing kids and their hip parent procured wacky touring transportation, opting for the retro scholastic chic of an old school bus. Ordinary yellow wouldn't do, so they repainted it themselves. It was only recently that I looked closely at that bus and noticed how the Partridges painted it in a pattern derivative of Piet Mondrian, the Dutch painter instrumental in the de Stijl art movement. They avoided the psychedelic *Scooby Doo*–ish "Mystery Machine" colors, so very groovy and typical then.

After *The Brady Brunch,* I waited what seemed like an

interminable amount of time through commercial breaks until, at eight thirty P.M., the main attraction kicked off. Keith and family swooped me away in the Mondrian bus for a half hour's ride to adventures unknown, escaping into a private Valhalla I hated to leave when the credits rolled at nine P.M.

Friday night soon became my beacon, a small lighthouse offering me refuge after a week of choppy emotional seas caused by family stress and a suffocating school daze. I felt a breathless need to share air with people who actually understood me—a tribe I hadn't met yet. With temporary TV room dibs, scarfing down Coke and the mushroom pizza I was allowed to order only on Friday, I experienced a connection that felt like a state of grace. Time after time, family crisis after crisis, Keith and Shirley Partridge understood and consoled. They knew what to say and do when Chris and Tracy ran away after being scolded, or when Danny thought he was dying after a tonsillectomy, or when Laurie had a meltdown over braces.

At nine P.M., my brothers or dad usually entered the room to reclaim our one television set. I'd disappear to my bedroom and shut the door, sad that my time with Keith was over that week.

One chilly Friday fall evening during the show's second season, the year David Cassidy's popularity took off like a rocket shooting past humdrum galaxies into the outermost solar system of teen stardom, I raced upstairs from our family room. I had a three-minute commercial break from more adventures with the poster boy for millions of young girls and, now I suspect, more than a few boys. I dashed to the kitchen for a Coke refill, passing the dining room, where my sister and mother were drinking wine and talking intently. My mother had uncorked a jug bottle of Gallo Chablis, which she'd told me was slightly sour tasting but always did the trick. My father was out at a poker game. No one mentioned my brothers, about whose whereabouts we'd all stopped inquiring. There'd been no sign of them that day. Asking where they were or when they'd return home was a surefire route to stress. With the men out, it was

a calmer, mostly testosterone-free zone and I felt safer. Typically, I wasted no time or words on my quick kitchen stopovers. But tonight was different. I was curious about my sister's conspiratorial whispers, which sounded dramatic, like secrets worth uncovering. I quickly deduced she was dissecting an argument she'd had with her teen-idol fiancée, while my mother confided her unhappiness with our dad. She said he was difficult to live with because he always cast a pall over family occasions. "Your father can't just have a pleasant time," she said. "He has to ruin it."

My mother smiled when I appeared and asked, "How's your show?"

"Good. It's cool," I replied quickly. "I have to get back. It's a commercial."

"Okay," she replied, her eyes slightly glazed and her smile placid but buzzed from the wine and the True menthol cigarette she was smoking.

Following an impulse I ponder to this day, my sister turned directly toward me and asked, "What is it with you and this show?"

"What?" I asked. I felt defensive about my independent Friday hour, the one time of the week I could be myself without reproach. I feared its being taken away before it felt fully mine. Was I about to be criticized?

"Do you have a crush on someone on it or something?" she asked, twirling strands of her thick, light-brown hair, which she'd probably straightened with orange juice cans earlier that evening.

"Yes," I replied, beaming what I now realize was the scared, exhilarated smile you show when someone cracks your secret code. The smile you reveal when you finally spill a secret, admit you're in love, or both. In that brief moment, beauty and truth win out over your fear about what anyone else thinks.

I turned beet red as both of them noticed my reaction and sat up a little straighter.

"Is it on a boy or a girl?" my sister asked. It was the first time

anyone ever indicated that it was possible not only to have a crush on someone of the same sex but also to utter that prospect out loud.

"Boy," I replied quickly, not sure what this would mean, feeling like a determined but teetering funambulist.

My mother's expression changed ever so slightly, her curiosity piqued. But she wasn't as invested as my sister, whose eyes widened like nosy saucers.

"Really?" she asked. "Who?"

I bubbled out, "His name is David, too, and he's the coolest guy in the world. I really like him."

It wasn't a completely unguarded moment. But it was as close to one as I'd had. I was self-aware enough to hear a voice within say, "Uh-oh, you better not act too excited. Don't show too much." I knew my admission meant something, and there would be no going back.

"What does he look like?" she asked.

"He's got this really cool shag hairstyle and the whole family plays in a band and he's funny," I said. I looked at my mother, whose smile was slight and noncommittal. "But it's not too long, Mom. He's not a hippie or anything like that."

My sister gave my mom a quick, knowing look. My mother resolutely refused to raise an eyebrow. I could see the wheels in my sister's mind turn as she thought of potential follow-up questions. The possibility hung in the air for several long, pregnant seconds until I said, "I have to get back. The show's going to come back on."

I made it to the kitchen, retrieved another Coke, and sped back to my sofa seat.

After that interchange, my small-screen crush on *The Partridge Family*'s male lead was exposed. But openness wasn't a door to discussion. I was a low-key, quiet boy, not prone to spontaneous revelations, and no one asked me questions that I wondered about myself, like why I didn't feel the same intense longing for Susan Dey, who played Keith's sister Laurie. Crushes weren't a part of any

conversations I had at home again. My sister was away at college and I saw her rarely. But my mother noticed my growing fascination with all things Partridge. She digested it in the context of my cousin Sandra, born three weeks after me, who was also a fan of the show and of David.

For Christmas 1970, my mother bought Sandra, who had gorgeous sandy curls and a sweet disposition, and me *The Partridge Family Album,* the group's first. The record designer made it red and textured to resemble an old-fashioned photo collection with a picture of the entire clan—and small insets of David and Shirley—on the back. It featured the group's biggest hit, "I Think I Love You," which I liked but didn't love, unlike the rest of the world, including adorable Sandra, who started dancing and singing every time she heard it. Stirred by David, too, Sandra openly expressed her simpler attraction. The adults applauded her girly beaming and girlish crush as a worthy rite of passage. After all, my mother's had been Frank Sinatra. My aunt's had been Elvis Presley. I knew I wouldn't be afforded the same entrée to this club. I was silently jealous of the freedom and tradition.

I liked that the group's most popular song didn't have the same dizzying effect on me that it had on everyone else. I felt different, superior, less shallow, not just a mere fan—someone who *paid close attention to more than the obvious.* I imagined that "I Think I Love You" wasn't David's favorite, either. In his May 1972 *Rolling Stone* interview, which I devoured along with all magazines covering him, he explicitly said that he wanted to be a rocker like Jimi Hendrix, not a bubblegum artist like Bobby Sherman. I was sure that studio executives made him sing it to appeal to the unsophisticated masses.

My favorite song on that album was "I'm on the Road," which featured the lyrics:

The morning whispers follow me, come my way
By noon, I'm on the far side of the sun.

And I can't keep these wheels from rolling
Into one more town

There's so much to be seen and done
To settle up before I settle down

So I'm on the road
Travelin' free and easy

I wanted to go on the road with David Cassidy. Later on, I was fascinated by the beat generation. It's easy to see now that I wanted to be a smaller Neal Cassady—or perhaps a mini Allen Ginsberg—to David's grown-up Jack Kerouac. Just what unusual friendship we'd develop was as devoid of clarity, as full of spontaneity, and as deeply meaningful as what Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty had lived through.

David Cassidy was a magic man casting spells that were powerful and confusing for a kid my age. He did not possess James Dean's brand of brooding and torture—a look and attitude I'd melt for a few years later. He brooded in his own distinct way, over teenage angsty concerns that I didn't fully understand but wanted desperately to discover, like broken hearts and high school drama. But I wasn't ready for James Dean. I needed a starter man-boy, a slowly opening gateway to the real male deal, a baby rebel with an undefined cause.

I may have been feeling a lot, but it wasn't showing. Or maybe the clueless around me just weren't tapping into the growing restlessness the show brought out in me. I was unbridled in that half hour, a boy without reins, not confined to a trotting ring, able to gallop freely. It gave my psyche a night off from the deep-rooted conventionality engulfing me like thick, heavy smoke.

When I wanted to run away from home, which was more and more frequently after my tenth birthday, my new favorite Partridge song was "Point Me in the Direction of Albuquerque"—I related

to the episode in which the song was performed. In it, the family picked up a hitchhiker named Jenny who asked for a ride to Albuquerque to meet up with her father. Not knowing that they were harboring a runaway, the unsuspecting Partridges arrived en famille to find her wanted by the police. Jenny lived with her grandparents in Nebraska but ran away every other week to go to her father in Albuquerque. In between running away, she longed for her dad. This episode allowed me to flirt with the feeling of longing for a dad and wanting to do the same thing Jenny did, but that feeling passed quickly. In the end, the family left Jenny, her grandparents, and her father alone to sort their lives out, with the implication that they'd work out conflicts to everyone's satisfaction. I didn't buy it. I imagined Jenny bolting from her family to board the Piet Mondrian bus and to rejoin the Partridges as they drove off to next week's episode. I hated that she was surrounded by people yet was still so alone.

Two years into the series, I became friends with an effeminate boy my age named Steve, a school chum who was slight, blond, and looked like Earring Magic Ken pre–Barbie and puberty. When he opened his mouth, an entire display of pink Pucci purses fell out. After I spent the day at the Springfield shopping mall with Steve, my parents took me aside to tell me that there were "scary people who went by the name 'homosexual' in the world" and I had to "be careful to avoid them."

"You see," said my conservative Virginian father, clearing his throat for the fourth time before getting his caution out, Steve, the eleven-year-old potential priss-pot predator, "might try to do things to" (or worse, *with*) me, and I "should be on guard." My parents couldn't have been more uncomfortable during this conversation; I couldn't have been more defensive or closed down. I simply nodded after their awkward warning. *Teeny queens can be predators. Got it.*

I could be myself with Steve, the only person who knew the extent of my crush. I called him Friday nights after the show to

review and dissect every plot point and musical number. We devoured *Teen Beat, 16,* and *Tiger Beat,* hiding the teenybopper, girly-centric magazines under our beds as if they were porn. I was intrigued by David's life and gobbled up every tidbit of information I could find. I knew that he was close to his real-life stepmother, Shirley Jones; he had a tentative relationship with his own dad and mom; he drove a white Chevrolet Corvette; and his best friend was Sam Hyman. I started drinking 7Up when I discovered it was his favorite drink and liked him even more when I found out we both loved horses. I started telling people I was "a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy" because that's what David said in an interview. I called Steve from a barbershop on the day I asked my stylist to work impossible magic and—with a wave of his comb and scissors—transform my dark curly hair into a shag style like Cassidy's. I looked in the mirror and felt a sense of victory. My mother had claimed that not eating leafy green salad would cause my hair to fall out and I'd never be able to get the Cassidy shag, and I had believed her.

After I got my faux shag—with the help of a blow-dryer wielding more horsepower than my family's Ford LTD—Steve and I attended an afternoon showing of the film *Cabaret* in Crystal City, which sounds like the place unicorns go to retire.

My sexual awakening got a Kit Kat Club–worthy charge from seeing flamboyant Liza Minnelli at her most divinely decadent strut around a seedy nightclub as she high-kicked her way in and out of relationships with closeted bisexual men. After that dirty, sexy Fosse experience, Steve and I got bolder in our assessment of David. We ripped the most seductive photos of him from teen magazines and pored over them, noting his light brown eyes, which always looked blue to me, and the compelling way he looked at the camera while leaning up against a tree; wondering what he'd look like out of the blue-and-white paisley shirt.

Begrudgingly, my parents let me continue my friendship with Steve, despite his naïve brag a week after seeing *Cabaret* that he was

now the youngest member of Limelight on Liza, billed as Minnelli's "official international fan club." I suppose that admission was as close to officially coming out as anything a twelve-year-old could say in 1973. It should have clued us all in that quixotic Steve wouldn't be put off by a little parental disapproval. I always attributed his lack of filter to being raised by a lax, liberal single mother. I was raised with conservative expectations. My parents liberally offered only two things—disapproval and caution.

When *The Partridge Family* abruptly ended in 1974, David morphed into a solo artist while I became a full-fledged teen. I replaced my small-screen crush with real-time ones who remained equally unreal, stuck in the vast, silent closet inside my teenage head. Then one blessed day on the cusp of twenty, the age David was when he joined *The Partridge Family,* I landed in the right place in real time with a crush who reciprocated.

During summer break between my sophomore and junior years in college, I worked in Southern California, where I met Greg, a twenty-four-year-old actor with a short, seventies shag and brown eyes, working at Universal Studios, not far from the Warner Bros. forty-acre back lot where the Partridges filmed their show. He was the first man I'd been attracted to who was out and I made a decision after our first night together to come out. If this was what a crush felt like when it got returned and morphed into a relationship, then I wanted more. The risks seemed inconsequential compared to the reward. When we weren't together, I thought about him all the time and pined for us to spend nights together with the windows in his apartment open, feeling the cool Southern California breeze as we slept. When I headed back to my East Coast school, our summer romance didn't translate to a fall long-distance relationship.

I returned to Virginia from Los Angeles and came out, or rather started the staggered process of coming out, which took years. In chronological order, I tentatively told a couple of close friends, then a larger network of pals, my sister, my divorced parents, and

the rest of my family. My mom reacted the way Shirley Partridge might have—caring and quick to make it seem okay. My dad was as irascible as ever.

"I don't care what your sexual orientation is," he said, "but I am concerned for your health," a reasonable comment given early grim news reports about AIDS. To which I replied, "Don't be. I'll be fine." After a pause, he added, "Don't expect me to ever discuss it."

A few years ago, after giving a reading in Boston for a book I'd written about gay relationships, I attended a David Cassidy concert. I read in a local alternative paper that he was appearing the one night I was in town and decided on the spur of the moment to buy a ticket. I went alone, curious about what the experience of seeing him—now in his fifties and playing the nostalgia concert circuit with groups like Herman's Hermits and the Monkees—would be like for my fortysomething self. When I walked into the concert venue, Partridge Family tunes and some of David's solo hits like "Cherish" wafted out of large speakers posted at each corner of the room. I ordered a Wild Turkey Manhattan with a 7Up chaser and leaned into the bar.

I looked around the room and saw mostly middle-aged women, dressed like soccer moms, chatting and girlishly twirling when one of the Partridge chords resonated and triggered muscle memory in their happy feet. I imagined Sandra, a soccer mom herself, at the concert with me—only now with the real me who'd openly share the exuberance she'd shown decades before.

Then the lights dimmed and he appeared, heading to the center-stage microphone with the confident lope I remembered from the show. He looked smaller than in my imagination and heavily made up, but still handsome. When he greeted the crowd with "I bet some of you remember this" and I heard the first chords of "C'mon Get Happy," I felt a jolt of electricity rock my body, a primal tremor resurrecting ancient memories from my childhood's family basement. I hadn't followed David's career for decades, but

long after their popularity faded, I never lost my love for him or *The Partridge Family.* As each new generation of technology emerged, I updated my massive collection of their music from record to cassette to CD to digital. The music that had rooted me to newly discovered desires within myself still played in the background—not as often, but nonetheless it remained a low, rumbling, steady soundtrack to my life. I wistfully wondered about what had happened to both of us in the intervening years.

We all grow up and we either accept ourselves or we don't. How had we held up under the strains of time?

Since Greg, I'd been in love a few times, most recently with Vic, my partner of five years. I'd heard that David Cassidy—married for the third time, father of several children, scattershot career subsequent to *The Partridge Family*—felt bitterly stuck within the limits that being teen idol and alter ego Keith Partridge had imposed on him. But I didn't sense that in person.

While entertaining the crowd, he encouraged us to go back to our younger self and rediscover the inner gawky fan within—that impressionable youth still ineffably longing for the first perfect object of our affection. He was like Zeus coming down from Mount Olympus for a brief, rocking return engagement to acknowledge and own the unquantifiable amount of energy, hopes, and dreams long ago placed on his slim shoulders. I wondered how he was able to assimilate the heady truth that he sparked the first desires of a generation that will forever cherish him in its reveries. *How odd that must be for him,* I thought as I watched this pied piper of crushes—with his dark, dyed hair, his ever-boyish face, and a short haircut that was a far cry from his beloved shag—call forth the still-teenage souls in the room.

I watched soccer moms leave their husbands and friends and move toward the stage, demonstrate their fealty, and return to their lighter, wide-eyed, younger selves. As female fans rushed the stage, reaching up to their quinquagenarian bubblegum demigod,

who was reaching back, I noticed several men my age, alone and standing on the sidelines like me. They were mouthing the words to songs like I was, slowly removing the self-conscious cloaks we'd worn into the concert venue. Ah, we were there. We are everywhere. We've been here all along.

My eye caught the glance of one of the men, who moved toward the bar where I'd encamped. He ordered a beer refill and I struck up a conversation.

"Did you ever think you'd be seeing David Cassidy live?" I asked.

"No," he laughed. "I think I'm caught in a time warp."

"I feel like my ten-year-old self just arrived and ordered a cocktail," I said, and smiled. Before David ended with—what else?—a rousing version of "I Think I Love You," he stopped singing solo midway, stuck the microphone out toward the audience, and cheered, "Now your turn!"

"Look at the crowd swarming him on the stage," he said.

"I know. I am tempted to join them," I replied.

"Were you a big Partridge Family fan?" he asked.

"Definitely," I said. "Especially Keith."

My new friend paused and said a little sheepishly, "Me too."

I laughed and recognized in his smile the scared exhilaration you show when someone cracks your secret code. The smile you reveal when you finally spill a secret, admit you're in love, or both. When, for that brief moment, beauty and truth win out over fear and concern with what anyone else thinks.

"Grab your drink, let's get a little closer to the stage," I said.