

Cassidy had ever dropped by our house and been persuaded upstairs to admire his multiple likenesses in my bedroom shrine, what exactly would I have wanted him to do?

I wasn't sure – How Could I Be Sure? – but holding hands would definitely have come into it. I got an e-mail recently from Judith, another Cassidy fan, who now works in advertising: 'David was blissfully wonderful, he wouldn't have tried to do the horrid, horrid, pathetic things that the boys at the Starlight disco tried of a Saturday night, ironically and, oh, how painfully, while *Some Kind of a Summer* [a Cassidy Top-10 hit] was blasted out by the DJ.'

Older guys thought they knew better. 'For many of the girls, it's the first time their little thighs get twitchy,' is how Cassidy's road manager once put it. In a famous interview for *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1972, when David deliberately set out to trash and toxify his own sweet image, he announced, 'This is very filthy, but when the hall empties after one of my concerts, those little girls leave behind them thousands of sticky seats.'

Yuck. Frankly, if I'd read that 30 years ago, I'd have thought the stuff on the seats was melted



Cassidy in 1985, when he made a surprise return to the UK Top-10 with the song 'The Last Kiss'

## What worries me about meeting my long-lost love is not that I will make a fool of myself, but that I will pity him

Strawberry Cornish Mivvi. Although I'm sure my crush contained a dollop of erotic longing, what it most resembled was *Courtly Love*, the rose-pure medieval tradition in which all of the lover's energy goes into veneration of the beloved, whom one cannot possibly hope to meet.

**I am going to meet David Cassidy.** In the days leading up to the interview in Fort Lauderdale, women friends bombard me with e-mails: 'I am simply too jealous to respond sensibly. David Cassidy, oh oh oh oh. I can vividly remember my *Jackie* poster on the G-plan wardrobe.' 'Can you ask him if he's free on Sept 25th, 7.30 for 8?' Only Sharon, my rival for David's hand, fully grasps the predicament: 'Will you be in the presence of a love god or a sort of pickled Liberate?'

What worries me about coming face to face with my long-lost love is not that I will be deprived of the power of speech; not that I will jabber with nervous excitement and make a fool of myself; not that the darling faun of memory will look so hideously changed I won't recognise him, nor that he will look so well-preserved that I will feel like an ancient crone beside him. No, the thing I fear most is that I will pity him.

This whole journey into the past is fraught with uncertainties. It is also, as my husband is keen to point out, a very bad idea. He is not hostile, just incredulous and openly disrespectful. As I pack for Florida, he comes in singing loud and horribly, deliberately off-key. 'Could it be forever-er-er?' I tell him to stop it, but he's enjoying himself now. 'There are two reasons why this trip is ridiculous,' he says. 'First, he can't sing in tune.'

'He can.'

'And secondly,' he adds, pointing at a *Jackie Annual* from 1973 lying open on the bed at a portrait of David dreamily recumbent in cheesecloth. 'Secondly, he's a girl. I'm sorry, but he's a girl.'

I am preparing to rebut this monstrous charge, when I suddenly realise he's right. Maybe we suspected it all along: David Cassidy was the prettiest

girl we had ever seen. That pageant-winning smile, thick lashes fringing hazel eyes, the slight figure (on the set of *The Partridge Family*, his stand-in was a girl called Jan) and not a hair out of place. In some places, indeed, not a hair at all: the teen idol was a depilatorist's dream of androgyny. No wonder we ached for him: he was the perfect transitional love object, somewhere between a doll and a man.

David Cassidy was 54 on Easter Monday. **FIFTY-FOUR!** How old does that make the little girls who loved him? Keats wrote of the 'still unravish'd bride of quietness', frozen in time on the side of a Grecian urn. We never got to ravish David, let alone be ravished in return, and that is why we can't think of him as middle-aged. For us he is immortal.

**I am five minutes late for my first date with David Cassidy.** Five minutes and 30 years. There was a last-minute clothes panic in the hotel room when I decided that a brown outfit might seem a little eccentric in the blazing Florida sunshine. These days, Cassidy lives with his third wife, songwriter Sue Shifrin, and their 12-year-old son Beau in a handsome mock-colonial house in one of Fort Lauderdale's waterside streets. When I walk through the front door, a slight figure is picking out a very familiar tune on the grand piano over by the window. Dear God, does David Cassidy spend his days playing his greatest hits to himself like some sort of pop-idol Miss Havisham?

Mercifully, it turns out that Lisa, *The Telegraph's* photographer, has asked him to sit at the keyboard and play. Veteran of 10,000 photoshoots, he is advising her that spontaneous action shots always look the most contrived.

He comes towards me, hand outstretched. Friendly, but with the inbuilt wariness of someone who, I realise with a jolt of sadness, has grown accustomed to seeing disappointment in

people's eyes. Dressed in dark jeans and a blue-black shirt, his skin is tanned, almost baked. The hair, which is thinning slightly but without even a flicker of grey, is blown back off the face in a style that is only just the right side of bouffant. No longer the waif of memory, he still looks great, and must work hard to stay that way. It's the smile that proves he is who he is – a joyous joker's grin that cues the pale green eyes to crinkle with amusement. The man standing in front of me looks at least 10 years younger than his age, but that still makes him 20 years older than David Cassidy.

'I hate having my picture taken,' he shrugs helplessly. 'Unfortunately, I still care enough to worry if I look bad.' As Lisa clicks away, I mention those tribes that believed their soul would be stolen by the camera. 'I had my soul stolen a long time ago,' says Cassidy.

His manner is far more theatrical than I imagined. When he offers me a 'British cup of tea' he switches into an accent last used by Lord Olivier. In the large French-country kitchen, he produces cups, but it quickly becomes clear that he doesn't really do domesticity when he starts raving about the excellence and cheapness of a particular biscuit. When I assure him that you can get the same biscuits anywhere, he says, 'I never go to the store.'

Sue potters around, keeping a tactful distance. A striking brunette with a strenuously youthful ponytail, she has the alert, wide-eyed look of someone used to getting elbowed aside by hubby's admirers. These days, Cassidy plays to audiences of 3,000 rather than 30,000, and his songs can actually be heard because the mature women in the audience don't scream any more, they sing along. The reservoir of feeling for him is deep, though. At the official David Cassidy website, admirers still post longing notes: 'When I was just 11 I fell in love with a stranger who touched my soul. I love him even now... His voice is there for me when nothing else is.'

David's agent, Jo-Ann Geffen, tells me that the hardcore fans can be a problem. Forty-somethings who have never given up on their idol. 'They move towards him like he's a meal,' Geffen says. 'It's OK when they're ladylike, but it can get real aggressive.'

When I ask if he finds the diehard fans a burden, Cassidy answers carefully. 'It's a great compliment that they still care, I love the fact that I've meant something to so many lives. It's pretty extraordinary if you can view the phenomenon somewhat objectively.' Subjectively, it's clearly a pain in the ass. After abdicating his Teen throne in 1974 aged 24, with a view to preserving what was left of his sanity, Cassidy fell into a catastrophic depression. For three years, he barely left his home in Los Angeles; it was as if he needed a decompression chamber to adjust to conditions back at mortal altitude. He was incredibly famous, but he couldn't have the career he always wanted, the career both his parents enjoyed as actors and musical-theatre performers. 'Directors wouldn't see me for a part because I was David Cassidy and my face was too well known, then they wouldn't see me because I hadn't got any parts recently, so I was a has-been.' The millions he should have made from all those miles of bubblegum had been swallowed up by middle-men. For years, he didn't even own the rights to his own likeness. Two wives came and went, though horses