PICTURE A TIME WHEN LOVE WASN'T FREE TO FLOURISH. THEN PICTURE SHIRLEY AND PAT.

Sweet Ride Shirley labeled this photograph "Smitty's car 1951." Clearly, a very good year.

A Story in Black & White

BY RACHEL B. LEVIN

In the offices of the Franchise Tax Board in San Francisco, my cousin Shirley Greenblatt was known for making waves. This was in the '70s, and her co-worker Anita Pagán remembers watching in fascination as Shirley, a tax collector, would launch into one of her famous outbursts. ✪ "She would stand up and throw her stuff on the ground and start telling off the manager," says Pagán. "Everyone in the place would stop, and we'd kind of sit and wait for her to finish.... There was no way to stop that tirade." ✪ Often, Shirley, in her 50s at the time, would get set off

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because the boss had asked her to garnish the wages of someone with a family, and her "liberal heart," as Pagán describes it, went out to them.

Pagán and her office buddies, all in their 20s, silently cheered on Shirley, who soon began to join the women for after-work drinks. "Sometimes we'd have a party," Pagán recalls, "and it'd always be at Shirley's house." They'd blend daiquiris, turn up the music, and dance. "She didn't miss a step," Pagán says. "But underneath all that bravado and spiciness, she was lonely."

At these parties, as the hour got late and the drinking heavy, Shirley would pull out black-and-white photographs and pass them among the group. They were of her late husband Collins "Pat" Patterson, whom she'd lost in 1974 to a heart attack.

"Talking to her late at night, I knew that a lot of her life was living in that memory of Pat," Pagán says. "There was a lot of grief to deal with.... She was living a half life for a long time."

But there was something else—some deeper source of tumult—that Pagán sensed from Shirley. It was more than just the ache of widowhood. "You could see there was pain, and that [something had] cost her."

When Shirley finally opened up to her about it, Pagán was shocked. The marriage that gave Shirley so much happiness and substantially defined her adult life was also her deepest secret.

I FIRST LEARNED of Shirley and Pat's love story in 2002, 50 years after they'd wed and more than a decade after they both had passed away. At the time, I was 27 and had been dating my boyfriend Tony for about six months. The feelings between us developed intensely and quickly—we were already talking about marriage. When Tony and I planned a trip from our home in Los Angeles to San Francisco, where he'd be introduced to my family, I confided in my Aunt Bobbi that I was nervous. Several of my relatives, and my grandmother in particular, would, I knew, be uncomfortable with the relationship because Tony is African-American. Aunt Bobbi's response floored me: "You know, our cousin Shirley Greenblatt was married to a black man and hid it from the family for many years."

Aunt Bobbi knew few details of Shirley and Pat's mixed-race marriage; she'd only heard about it through the family grapevine. The couple wed in 1952 and, despite living just miles away from Shirley's parents and many of her closest relatives, kept it from them for nearly 20 years. What had it been like, living out their lives in such secrecy? What toll did it take on them individually and as partners? Had they found a way to live happily regardless of the challenges, or was it a life of stresses and routine struggle? I was instantly consumed by their story and driven to piece together fragments of memory—the trace recollections of Pat and Shirley's scattering of friends and family—into as complete a portrait of love as I could render.

Today, we think of San Francisco as a bastion of tolerance, a place in the vanguard of marriage equality. But as Shirley's friend Evangeline "Vangie" Buell told me, the Bay Area was not an unequivocally safe haven for interracial couples in 1952.

Buell was among Pat and Shirley's small circle of trusted friends in the '50s and '60s. A Filipina whose grandfather was African-American, she married her first husband—a Caucasian named Hank—the same year Pat and Shirley wed. Four years earlier, California had repealed its anti-miscegenation laws (the 12th state to do so by 1948), clearing the way for people of different races to marry. However, widespread acceptance of mixed-race marriage was a long way off.

"People would cross the street if they saw an interracial couple coming toward them," Buell remembers. "It was insulting and humiliating." On occasion, humiliation crossed into harassment. "At the time, all mixed couples had to be careful going out. You had to be sure you were not in places where you were going to be assaulted."

It was only in 1967, with the landmark case of *Loving v. Virginia*, that the United States Supreme

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Court declared anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional. Even today, according to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, only 60 percent of Americans are comfortable with the thought of a family member entering into a mixed-race marriage.

For Shirley's parents—part of a tight-knit group of Orthodox Jews who had emigrated from Russia in the 1920s and settled close to one another in San Francisco's Richmond District—the taboo was intensified because Pat was a Gentile. But race was the deal-breaker. Shirley's friend Judith Levy told me, it "would have been a *shanda*" (or a shame) on her parents if their daughter had married a person of color. The custom would have been to sit *shiva* for Shirley—to mourn her. In the bluntest of terms, she would have been considered dead to them.

That prospect left Shirley with a nearly impossible choice: give up the man she loved or risk severing a deep and vital connection to her family. Secrecy was the imperfect solution for avoiding either.

Early in their marriage, Pat and Shirley didn't even live under the same roof. Housing covenants barring blacks from residing in the more desirable sections of San Francisco made it difficult for them to find a rental, and while they searched, Shirley remained at home with her folks. Eventually, they found, and bought, a house about five miles south of Shirley's parents, in a mixed-race area near San Francisco State College. But this created a challenge of its own: With her parents in such close proximity, how could the couple guard their secret against regular visits?

Every week, Shirley's mother would "come in and tidy up, look through the drawers, and help," Vangie Buell recalls. That meant there could be no trace of Pat—not a single sock. So Shirley stashed his stuff in the basement. "She talked about it all the time, because it was a hardship. She had to pack everything from the closet, all of his shoes, to hide the fact that a man lived with her."

Their differences seemed to create a perfect balance. She was vivacious, he was soft-spoken and patient.

During some of those weekly visits, Pat would take off and return only when the coast was clear. On occasion, he'd opt to instead hide in the basement, a revelation that struck me as humiliating and tragic. What must it have felt like to be an outcast—literally forced underground—in your own home? Buell says Pat took it in stride. "He was married to the woman he loved. She happened to be white. And he felt, if this is what I have to suffer in order to be with her, I will."

It was a life of considerable isolation. Venturing out as a couple meant running the risk of either bumping into one of Shirley's family members or meeting with unwelcome confrontation on the street. Buell remembers hearing about a particularly hostile run-in on a streetcar. After that, she says, "they were very careful about going out. If they had to be together, they couldn't acknowledge each other or hold hands."

Even something as simple as grabbing dinner was fraught with uncertainty. "We used to go to Chinese restaurants together," Judith Levy remembers, "because that was the safest place." The non-kosher Chinese fare ensured that Shirley's Jewish relatives would not be at the next table.

Pat and Shirley also found a haven in the jazz joints of the Fillmore District, which, because of its concentration of music clubs, was known at the time as the "Harlem of the West." "They loved jazz and they were real aficionados," Buell says. More importantly, remembers Anita Pagán, they felt safe. In the Fillmore, she says, "there were all kinds of people of all kinds of mixtures." And in the abandon of those music-filled nights—on the dance floor where differences in race and religion didn't matter—they experienced precious moments of freedom.

Like every love story, this one has complex and sprawling roots. Shirley was born in 1923, the daughter of a baker father and homemaker mother; Pat, 15 years her senior, was born in 1908, to sharecroppers in the rural outskirts of Nashville, Tennessee. In her teens, Shirley was literally a card-carrying member of a jazz fan club called the

Hot Music Society, and as a young adult was involved in various Zionist groups. Pat, as a young man, played baseball, and as an adult made a living repairing shoes before enlisting, at age 34, to defend his country in World War II. After a three-year Army stint that took him from Casablanca to France to Germany, he mustered out at Monterey Bay's Fort Ord and headed up the coast, where he fell in love with the Bay Area.

The two met in the early '50s when they crossed paths in a government office building where they worked, Shirley as a typist for the California Department of Justice and Pat as a janitor for the State Division of Buildings and Grounds. Their differences seemed to create a perfect balance. She was headstrong, quick-tempered, vivacious, and dramatic, with flashing blue eyes and a penchant for red lipstick. In contrast, he was even-keeled, contemplative, soft-spoken, and patient. But they shared a zest for life, food, and music. The few intimates who knew them said they were crazy in love. Still, says Anita Pagán, "there was that thing of secrecy right away, not just because of their color, but also because of his station—a janitor dating a white-collar worker."

That perceived professional disparity was certainly not reflected in Pat's pride. "He was the kind of man who commanded a lot of respect," says Shirley's niece Cathy Mitchell, who was born the year Shirley and Pat wed and, despite her closeness with her aunt, was let in on the couple's secret only as a teenager. "I think it was just sort of his presence. You got the feeling that people looked up to him on the job."

Mitchell has a letter Shirley wrote to her detailing Pat's experience in the Army, where he was also held in high esteem. "When they first integrated the servicemen," Shirley wrote, "Pat was a master sgt. and they chose him as one of the first 'negroes' to help integrate the armed forces."

Unveiled The couple's wedding-day photos were not scenic.

It was a bitter reality, then, for him to return from serving his country with such inspiration and strength, only to be confronted anew with limited opportunity and entrenched inequality. "It took Pat about 2 or 3 years into our marriage," Shirley wrote, "before he talked to me about his years in the war. We were sitting watching the beginning of a war movie on TV when he started to tremble and asked if we could please switch to something else. He proceeded to pour a stiff shot of 'Old Granddad.' He talked non-stop for about 3-4 hours. He poured out everything he had felt for so long. He fell asleep in my arms that evening."

One irony of Pat's circumstance was particularly piercing: The same man who sat in the basement of his own home, in hiding from his Jewish in-laws, was a member of a military unit that liberated a concentration camp where thousands of Jews had perished. "Every last soldier was in complete shock," Shirley wrote of the trauma of what Pat and his company saw that day in Germany. "Most of them had nightmares for a long time."

Fascinatingly, Shirley's parents, Usher and Rachel, had met in hiding during one of the *pogroms* that devastated the Jewish population in early-20th century Russia. "They lived in this little town," Shirley's sister-in-law, Ruth Greenblatt, told me before her death in 2008. "The buildings there used to have these hollow walls, and that's where Usher hid" as the Cossacks swept violently through the ghettos. Rachel was tucked away inside the same wall.

Paradoxically, Shirley and Pat's need to keep their own closeness concealed resulted in unending heartache for Rachel. "It was her biggest sorrow, living all those years and thinking that Shirley was single," says Lynne Semi, the daughter of Shirley's cousin and best friend since childhood. Every Friday night, Shirley would faithfully go to her parents' home for the Sabbath meal. And every week, her mother would ask her, "Haven't you met a nice boy? Can I introduce you?"

"I think she would have been *thrilled* to know that her daughter was so happy," Semi says.

In the '50s, tolerance among blacks for interracial unions was certainly no guarantee, either. Pat lost both of his parents in the years before he married Shirley, so it's impossible to say whether they'd have embraced the couple. Pat's sister Mattie, his only immediate relative, moved to San Francisco to be close to him, and although she accepted the marriage, she and Shirley never really got along.

Pat's lineage ended there, the couple having decided not to have children. It was, says Vangie Buell, "a conscious choice because of Shirley's mother and father." Hiding the relationship was struggle enough. How could they have kept a child secret?

"There was pain there," says Anita Pagán, who sensed that, conversationally, the subject of children "was one area where Shirley wouldn't go."

Shirley hadn't wanted to compromise anything, yet sacrificed so much. In the end, did she deem her choices worth it?

Remarkably, it seems not to have unsettled her bond with Pat. An obligation to secrecy, a circumscribed existence, and childlessness—many relationships have crumbled in the face of lesser challenges. My romance with Tony, for example, did not last. I was crushed when we broke up after nine months for reasons that, in the end, had nothing to do with race. Had their strained circumstance ever led to resentment or discord?

If it had, Vangie Buell never saw it. Disagreements between them, she said, were worked out in a teasing, playful way. "They were definitely happily married."

Pat and Shirley finally made their marriage public in 1970, eight years after her father's death and just a few weeks after they'd laid her mother to rest. Untethered from the shame they'd anticipated from Shirley's parents, and emboldened by the growing acceptance, at large, of interracial marriages, they experienced complete freedom for the first time. Movement suddenly became a theme for a couple that for so long had lived under so much restraint. They ventured out more frequently to local spots, and used an 8-mm movie camera to record road trips to San Diego and Yosemite. Many of the shots are of Pat behind the wheel, racing along open highways, and of Shirley running across the frame in joy.

On their wedding day in 1952, the couple was not photographed against one of San Francisco's sweeping bay views but in the cramped living room of Pat's flat. The images are a metaphor for the marriage they embarked on that day: one lived out within a limited frame, inside private spaces, and, most poignantly, in black and white. Their lives, cast for so many years in shadow, now appeared in vibrant color. That burst of exuberance, though short-lived, is the image of Pat and Shirley that most endures for me.

In 1974, at the age of 66, Pat died of cardiac arrest, and Shirley struggled without him. Drugs and gangs overtook the neighborhood where they had shared a home. She lost her two brothers to illness and became estranged from her sisters-in-law, who resented being implicated in her decades of deceit. In 1985, Shirley began a battle with cancer that she ultimately lost five years later.

Given the extraordinary isolation of her married life, the decision to forego motherhood, and the ache of sorrow that followed, I wondered about the path Shirley had chosen to travel. This firebrand who wasn't afraid to make waves at work, who'd been brave enough to cross racial lines in marriage during a time of great intolerance, had cowered rather than break an essential bond with her parents. She hadn't wanted to compromise anything, yet sacrificed so much. In the end, did she deem her choices to be worth it?

On a trip to San Francisco, I decided to visit Pat and Shirley's graves. From their death certificates, I knew they were interred at the same cemetery, just south of San Francisco. But would I find them in sections informally set apart by ethnicity?

When a helpful clerk marked a map with their whereabouts, I was heartened to see that they shared the same plot. I made my way down a row designated for war veterans. Nearly every headstone was upright, ornate, and etched with a reference to military service.

When I reached Pat and Shirley's plot, I stood in wonder. Their marker was a simple rectangle of gray granite embedded in the earth. Across the top, it read "Patterson," and just below were their names: "Collins, 1908-1974" and "Shirley, 1923-1990." There was no military inscription, no detail of rank and company or years of service. No formalities or flourishes.

Just four words. And they answered all my questions.

"We Had It All," it said.

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