

Prejudice  
by May Cotton © 1999, 2025

I can pinpoint the exact moment in time when I lost my innocence and became so fearful that the hidden tendency toward prejudice I hadn't known existed reared its ugly head. It was at the University of Wyoming, that first year when I was a freshman. I was in the steam tunnels, walking from cafeteria to dorm, from Washakie to Downey Hall, where I would come up to street level, cross the windy corner at 15th and Iverson, and walk four blocks to my own dorm in the heart of the campus.

The disadvantage of living in Ross Hall was that our cafeteria next door in Knight Hall was closed weekends; we had to make the hike to Washakie at least twice a day every Saturday and Sunday. It was probably snowing outside, because normally I did not walk through the cavernous, echoing steam tunnels, even though they fascinated me. There were all sorts of interesting rumors involving the older steam tunnels on the original campus, but only maintenance people were allowed to enter them. These new, larger tunnels, however, had been designed with the students in mind, creating a vast labyrinth of underground passageways connecting all the newer dorms in the Washakie Complex.

I had lived in one of those dorms during my first term at UW, but now I was a member of the single elite wing of freshmen women who lived in Ross Hall, a dorm normally reserved for seniors and grad students. And it was from my perspective as one of these elite that I was unprepared for my steam tunnel encounter with the woman who lived in the room next door to me, also a freshman and part of that elite circle.

But maybe she didn't believe herself to be part of that circle. She was, after all, the only black woman on campus that year. I naively thought that she was in an elite circle all her own. I hadn't yet discovered the realities of the redneck world in which I was living, so I was unprepared for the sudden change in her behavior when I encountered her that snowy afternoon in the steam tunnel with the rest of the black students.

There were six black men on campus that year, all from the East Coast, all football players on athletic scholarships, which made them of a size to intimidate me. And intimidate me they did, laughing and talking with the woman I thought was my friend, making threatening and disparaging remarks about me as I attempted to walk by.

I had never encountered blacks in a group before. I had never seen black men strut and prance to impress a woman. Nor I had met the other black woman who was with them, a childhood friend of my dorm neighbor who had come from Cheyenne for the weekend to bolster her girl friend's ego and check out these black Easterners.

When I think about it now, I realize those football players were probably just playing, just being adolescents trying to impress the only two women who might be available to them. It was

1969, a time when, in Wyoming at least, mixed marriage meant the union of a Catholic and a Protestant. No one had yet imagined the multi-racial children who would be born in the next generation, offspring of the youth who would choose to be color blind.

Unlike my peers, I was just awakening to the fact that I was NOT color blind. I was standing in a steam tunnel, a frightened white girl having her first encounter with more than one black person at a time. Whether they were swaggering for the sake of the women they hoped to impress, or whether they were dead serious, their threats to me if I tried to walk past them were as real as the fear in my chest which was quickly turning to rage.

I was shocked my dorm mate said nothing as I was warned not to proceed down the vast empty tunnel — empty except for this gang of eight black people. It was years before I understood that my friend was doing her own kind of strutting by not acknowledging me, by standing aside while the boys<sup>1</sup> she was trying to impress taunted her white neighbor. But at that moment, while they threatened and she remained silent, fear awoke in me with a vengeance. It bubbled up inside of me, turning my Pollyanna acceptance of all people into a vicious hatred. All of my carefully erected walls, piled up over the years to shut out the disparaging remarks made by my grandparents about “the coloreds,” came crumbling down.

Somehow, in the face of this emotional disaster, I squared my shoulders and stood my ground, trusting in the truth I was sure they also knew. They did not dare touch me. Because of the world in which we lived in 1969, the whiteness of my skin protected me. If any one of them dared to act on his threats, he would certainly lose his scholarship and any hope he had of rising out of the prejudice which confined him to a world not of his making. He might even lose his life.

I might have been a white girl alone in a small crowd of blacks, but the culture of the wild west was all around us, and none of these burly young men wanted to tangle with the notorious hard drinking, shit kicking cowboys who outnumbered them a thousand to one. They had seen too many long-haired hippies held down to have their eyes blackened and their heads shaved. This was Laramie, Wyoming, where 30 years later, Matthew Shepard would die for the same sin of being different.

We stood there in the steam tunnel for several long moments, the group menacing, me standing my ground, each of us looking into our own minds, where they found the truth which forced them to back off, and I found the hatred that enabled me to walk on by.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the update on the next page before making a judgment on my use of the term ‘boys.’

## 2022 Update

When I wrote this essay in 1999, I was reflecting on the way things were 30 years earlier. To my way of thinking, these young men were just boys, as my friend and I were just girls — we were all overgrown children. None of us was old enough to be considered adults, and my use of the term ‘boys’ was intended to reveal our age and lack of maturity; it was never intended to convey anything derogatory. I realize times have changed and many of the words we used then are no longer appropriate, but I still want to convey the youthfulness of those lads who frightened me enough to change my attitude toward people of color, and to maintain the atmosphere of what life was like in Wyoming in the late 1960s.

In the intervening years, my awareness and understanding has expanded greatly, and I have rarely shared this essay because of the immediate judgment by readers and listeners to my use of the word ‘boys.’ Like all experiences which changed me, I consider this an important lesson in how the world actually is versus how I want it to be. My growth as a person is predicated on these experiences. I cannot help being who I am any more than I can change the color of my own skin, but I can share my lessons in the hopes that others might grow as well.

This is not intended to be an excuse. Rather, it is an explanation of why, all these years later, I have chosen not to change the original terminology.