

## Coming of Age and Love in Post 9/11 America part 1



*Shanthi Marie Blanchard is a MSc student at the London School of Economics and Political Science and studies Gender, Policy and Inequalities. In this essay, she uses the concept of intersectionality as a tool to unpack her understanding of her area youth's transition into adulthood which transpired after 9/11 in her small rural Midwestern town. This post is the first in a two part post.*

I was thirteen when 9/11 happened. I remember being late for school and rushing to my locker to grab my algebra book for class before the last bell rang. As soon as I walked into the cream-colored cement hallways of my small rural Midwest grade school, I knew something was wrong. The lockers were flooded with students grabbing all their belongings and running into their classrooms. Our 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher looked pained and frantic directing the students about.

“Get everything. Your lunch, your gym clothes, anything you might need for the next few days”, he called to me as I stood frozen in place. “We’re going into lockdown.”

We ran into the classrooms and the teachers bolted the doors behind us, turning the long white handles of the cheap plastic blinds, and switching off the bright fluorescent lights. The only thing shedding luminosity in the dark murky classroom was the bright blue sky and silver tower that glowed from the television screen above the teacher’s desk. Good Morning America showed recaps of a small object crashing into the World Trade Center. We watched with horror as the second plane made its way into tower number two. We saw the building crumble, and though we cried, our thirteen-year-old minds were unsure how to process what we had just seen.

“This is your Pearl Harbor,” we were told.

“This is your Kennedy.”

This would define us.

When our class made its way out of the doors of our small brick school, a building remodeled from the one-room schoolhouse which had originally stood in the old cornfield half a century ago, we eighth graders realized we had witnessed something that was more than just a national crisis. Already on the verge of adolescence- a stage in our development in which the paint chips of childhood levity hung delicately against the aged wooden barn where we once played games- we were broken from our blissful ignorance. We were thrust into a time of ideological warfare and international adversariness. We would now cross the threshold into adulthood-our young minds awaiting answers to what had happened that day- ready to be filled by whatever information we were given. We would come of age during America’s time of terrorism, the consequences of which I still find myself unpacking every day.

It’s been ten years since that day. I’ll be twenty-four next month. I’ve experienced many things since then – I won my first state track meet, had my first kiss, competed as a scholarship athlete at a division one university, studied in over sixteen different countries. I had my first heartbreak. But those moments are always shadowed by the image of that day. My state medal carried a picture of the American flag on it – ‘One Country United by God,’ it said – a far cry from the depiction of the sprinter running across the front of its metallic face the year before. My first kiss was with a boy who wanted to prove his manhood by joining the army to defend our country. My scholarship to Santa Clara was to escape the conservative and militaristic ideals of my Midwestern town. My quest to study in various parts of the world was to try to unlock some greater truth that had been masked by ideas of nationalism, patriotism, and honor that had been perpetuated by [the Bush](#)

Administration. My first heartbreak came ten years later, when I walked away from that same childhood sweetheart, whose decision to fight against the greater evil years before, had shattered any chances of our ability to be with one another.

He wasn't alone. Many of the boys from my hometown reverted to this call. Of course, when we were fourteen and fifteen years old, we didn't understand that we would be the ones to fight the ideological war, whose breaking news updates interrupted our history lessons, whose presidential speeches became a part of family dinner time. What we did understand was a world in which we helped harvest our Daddy's crops under the vibrant autumn shades of fall, and sat grudgingly in the wooden pew each Sunday morning as our mothers coaxed us to sit up straight and eat the unleavened bread and grape juice of the Lord's sacrament. We understood that as neighbors, we needed to bring a chicken soup and pie over to the family next door when they were down with colds during the wintertime, and that it was important to let the little kids play football with you at recess, not only because someday you would need them to beat the neighboring town at the homecoming football game, but because they were the little siblings of your friends, and we always looked after our own. We understood that decent boys never let girls walk to her car by herself, and that if a boy liked you, he would leave a rose on your car window and talk to your parents about taking you out for a movie. We knew of God and Jesus, and of a higher calling in life; one that we all wanted to achieve in our earthly existence. Even the most secular and untraditional of us came together for basketball games, barbecues, weddings, births, and funerals. We were happy where we were, and we found value and contentment in how we lived our lives and the relationships we cherished.

The presence of military recruiters after 9/11 somehow changed the dynamics of that existence. There was something inherently disturbing yet simultaneously natural when they approached us for recruitment during our lunch periods. At first, the eyes of the boys were cast with dismissive pity for the men in uniform who would try to keep them from achieving their dreams of becoming the next Bill Gates or winning a Noble Prize. Besides, we were still sneaking whiskey away from our father's cabinet. The thought of dying for something we didn't understand seemed otherworldly. I remember our eerie, ironically haunting, sardonic laughter to those calls of duty during those lunch periods; the boys couldn't have understood that within a few years, not only would they find themselves ardently supporting the war effort, but enlisting.

We were all too young to realize that the military was targeting us because we came from an economically depressed rural area, and that it was from our group of people that they recruited nearly half of their enlistees (Tyson, 2005). They came to us because they knew that within a few years, we would realize we didn't have the money for college and there weren't enough jobs in our area to make a living (Tyson, 2005). They knew that for many of us the only choice we had was to go to war to have a chance to keep dreaming.

The military recruiters never acknowledged this white elephant, of course. Instead, they spoke about words of 'pride', 'defending the honor of the country', 'protecting your loved ones,' 'keeping America safe', and maybe most importantly, 'becoming a man'. It resonated with the things we understood the most, though it resonated with the boys most of all; although it only became evident years later when the dilemma of how to get to college or find a job came about. The army painted the decision of joining as the way to make it out of town- the first step in achieving your dreams and seeing the world. Just fulfill the duties of being a soldier, and through the Montgomery and the Post 9/11-GI Bill, they would receive over 50,000 dollars to help pay with school, receive 36 months of benefits for fees, tuition, monthly living allowances, books and supplies ([goarmy.com](http://goarmy.com)).

Some boys signed their names on the line while we were still in high school; others enlisted in the military right after graduation. Within a year or two, the green berets swept up the first round of boys. Their old high school girlfriends stood by them, supporting their decisions and marrying them before the first deployment. Some of the girls were unknowingly with child. All of them were unknowing as to whether their husbands would come home.



I took [Marsha Henry's](#) class on Gender and Militarization this year because I wanted to understand what had happened to my small town, rural Midwestern boys. I spent years thinking about how those decisions happened. What happened when our boys decided to march off to join this call? I wanted to know what had happened to that boy I loved. It was more than our rural backgrounds, or the socioeconomic status. It was more than 9/11 and our religious roots.

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March 1st, 2012 | [Politics, Society](#) | [2 Comments](#)

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