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My First Communion

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Me beaming after the reading, veil removed

All societies celebrate the different stages of a person's life by means of 'initiation rites'. In Catholic societies, the First Communion is a rite that marks the end of innocent childhood. I can remember my First Communion very well...

In October 1985, my family moved from New York to Toronto, because my grandfather had been appointed consul general of the Philippines in the Canadian city. I was sent to a Catholic school called St Michael School. I remember the first day of school very well. The principal, Sister Pickett, led me to Mrs DeCourcy's second grade class. A free desk was waiting for me in a corner that was strategically far away from the blackboard. "Perfect," I thought, for nothing scared me more than to be close to the blackboard. The sheer possibility of making a fool out of myself in front of everyone always made me cry.

That's why it was a torture when Mrs DeCourcy once made all of us go up to the blackboard to read our compositions out loud. "*Loud and clear and with feeling,*" she reminded us. After Sheila and Eddie, it was my turn. "*I am going to talk about dogs,*" I began. But then I got stage fright¹. I saw thousands of faces whirling around, all expecting the best out of me... my brow tightened, my lower lip protruded, my breathing accelerated and then, like a flood, tears poured out of my eyes. I had to sit down. It was Nelson's turn.

I'm not saying that my new school was like the Spanish Inquisition. On the contrary, never was I

a happier little girl. It is true that I avoided going up to the blackboard, but everything else was great, excellent, outstanding. I especially treasure the memories of me playing with Sheila at recess time, frolicking under the cold Canadian snowflakes.

Sheila and I were looking forward to our First Communion, which was going to take place in May 1986. But history changed its course in February. A peaceful revolution in the Philippines finally kicked President Marcos, a tyrant and a dictator, out of the country. This was good and bad news for my family. On one hand, we now were citizens of a democratic country but, on the other hand, our diplomatic passports were taken away, and we were forced to return to Manila. At that time, I was old enough to feel the anxiety among the members of my family, but I was still too young to grasp the importance of the Revolution. I was only worried because I had to leave St Michael School. Sister Pickett and Mrs DeCourcy thought that it was a pity for me to leave so suddenly, so they allowed me to at least celebrate my First Communion ahead of my class. It was to happen on Holy Thursday, March 27th, 1986, at the school mass.

I was so nervous before mass! Me sitting on the first row of the church, so close to the altar, looking like Madonna in "Like a Virgin"! And, to make things worse, Sister Pickett wanted me to read one of the readings. I was sure that I was going to cry, just like when I had had to read my composition about dogs. Besides, it was going to be even more nerve-wracking, because I had to read in front of the whole school, not just in front of my classmates. All eyes were set on me; my eyes did their best to focus on my trembling piece of paper. I could hardly hear myself when I whispered the first words. But, all of a sudden, I felt all right. I wasn't nervous or shy anymore. I didn't feel the need to cry. I read the passage perfectly, my voice did not even quiver. I wondered why I had suffered so much when reading my composition about dogs.

My First Holy Communion was the threshold between my childhood and my pre-teens. When I was a child, I always needed protection and I didn't dare face any strange situations. The reading of the mass of my First Communion was the first time I ever spoke in public without hesitation. As I grew older, I even developed a taste for being on stage. Of course, every once and a while I suffer from shyness attacks, but that's normal, isn't it? I wonder how my personality will change on the day of the next rite of my life: marriage.

¹ Miedo escénico