



In the shop I looked fine, but when I actually put it on at home it didn't look good and I was sort of – I started the day off very tearful because I didn't want to wear it. Because I was the only little brown face stuck in a sea of white faces and I felt odd. And it made me scared as well 'cause we were told that we had to starve; we weren't allowed to eat from the previous midnight, basically to cleanse your body and soul and all that. And I thought, well, I haven't changed colour so I can't be pure yet.

And the photographs – I think, oh my God, back drawer, underneath, don't look at them. Yeah, I do, yeah. But they were awful. We've got a couple of group ones that my father took as well, and it is just this little brown face stuck in this sea of white ... And that is the first time I realised I was a different colour. A different colour, yeah, 'cause I'd never seen myself as a colour before then, you know? My mum was brown, my dad was white. It didn't matter to me what colour one was or the other. My friends were white, you know. I'd met brown people, but I'd never had much to do with them. But it wasn't until I was surrounded by them, and I was actually being photographed group-wise, that I realised it, yeah. It was a real eye-opener for me. Not only in the fact that, you know, I took Holy Communion but the fact that I realised who I was.



When you go to have your photograph

taken, there's this really strange set-up in the back of the studio that makes you feel like you're in church ... you look like this absolutely perfect virgin. You're innocent, you're perfect, you're having your First Communion, there are no blemishes. You have been to the confessional and have had everything wiped clean and here you are: the perfect virgin at Communion. And that persona is just instilled in you for weeks before, that you have to be this perfect lady. It is so interesting because it's all about the soul versus the body. And I see that.

You know, I don't think most people realise that this is what little girls go through, because you're already starting to compete. You go and pick out your dress and your hair is done ... It's like we got started in Catholicism with this competition thing because I didn't care about those sort of things until then. It's like you're the show dog, you're the horse at the races, you're the beauty queen at the pageant.





I think it's obvious that this is the age of reason – seven years old is set out as the age of reason. And preparing for the first confession is actually – you are encouraged to stand outside of your own activities. And the model that we used, of course, in my generation, was set by John Henry, Cardinal Newman's catechism. And that was shot through with Marcus Aurelius and the Roman Stoics ... It's a funny affair this Communion thing because first of all you stand outside yourself and examine your conscience, as Marcus Aurelius did, like a Roman general, and then the next day you turn up like a Baroque marshmallow.



The thing about the Holy Communion

dress of course is, it's not the first time that girls have worn it in those days, that kind of bridal outfit, because we wore them on the May procession. I mean, I'd always had a very disturbing time in the May procession because of my allergies. Where most of the girls were there with great handfuls of blossom, you know, from baskets, that they were chucking about all over the place and singing 'Oh Mary we crown thee with blossoms today', I had to be well back and out of the way, behind the grannies, because of my hay fever.

So you couldn't hold the flowers?

No, and so I always had the dress and I was in church with everyone else, but in the procession I had to walk away from the other girls which was quite upsetting. I was always apart from them. So the first time I actually walked up in the procession was at my First Holy Communion.



My father fashioned himself quite a photographer. Well, the funniest thing was, I think he was usually, you know, so drunk that they would all be blurry. And he always had these really expensive cameras and you'd stand there and – I mean, he was never a stumbling drunk, I never even knew my father was an alcoholic till way later – but most of them came out blurry. So he'd have these rolls and rolls of film and I'd think, well, this must be kind of difficult. So when I finally got my first camera I'm thinking, how the heck am I going to use this, you know? Pictures never come out ...

Were your First Communion pictures blurry?

Well, some of them. Most of them.