

The Red Tablecloth – Version 3 (written in present tense)

by Violet Isaac

It is December 25, 1944. A long red tablecloth is the central focus in a blurred snapshot stored in my narrow focused view. I can't see Grandma, who most certainly is near the big wood-burning stove, or perhaps in the long adjoining pantry. At some point I sneak into the pantry where the pies are lined up neatly on the counter. Oh, I see a big bowl of popcorn balls! I want to take one but I don't dare. All the aunties are in the kitchen, of course, if not helping with meal prep, then just talking. I'm almost three and from the shelter of Mommy's long skirt I can see the other room. There the uncles and older boy cousins are seated in a huge ring around the room. Later as I get older, my memory fills in the names of some of those boys, Jesse, Leonard, Ralph and Donald. Grandpa must be there on the other side of the wall section which separates the two large rooms.

As if from far away and coming closer, voices gain clarity. The alert signal is aunties laughing. They are talking about babies. Now what is that all about? Somebody is putting plates on the red table. Everybody is having babies. It is probably my first awareness that my mommy is going to have a baby. And so is Aunt Ila, Aunt Kathy, Aunt Margaret and Aunt Helen. I see them comparing their tummies. Aunt Nellie is not pregnant. She has no babies yet. How can I know all this? Robert, my brother, has cousins his age born within months of each other.

Later, while the adults eat dinner, someone escorts me up that narrow staircase to play with cousins I barely know. Judy and Lavalley are much too grown up to play with us. Marjorie, Eleanor, Eileen and I are about the same age but I'm really too shy to play with them. I sit on the edge of the bed and watch wistfully. I'm hungry and I wonder if there will be any food left for us after the grownups have eaten. Finally, we are called to the table. It's our turn to eat and we scramble for seats at the long red tablecloth. There's lots of food. There always is.

Many years later Grandma and Grandpa sell their country home and move into Linden. Special items are divided among their children. Uncle Aaron, my favorite uncle, is given the celebration tablecloth. Because he is single and constantly on the move, it is stored for him in Grandma's cedar chest. Even his car is sometimes left behind. When it is parked in our yard, I wash, wax and polish it, surprising him when he returns. By this time I know that he works at odd jobs and spends his money drinking and gambling. When he dies in a car accident near Hay River, NWT in the fall of 1964, I become the recipient of the red tablecloth. I keep it in my cedar chest and only bring it out for special occasions.