

# AUNT CHLOE

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## Udessa

by Dolen Perkins-Valdez

He remembered that it snowed that early day in March, and he woke to the sound of a broom brushing across the back porch. He eased his legs out of bed and placed his feet right into his slippers. The morning cold made him feel like an old man even though he was only sixty-eight. His wife warmed up a whole room and without her in the bed beside him, he shivered. She had not started heating the water for coffee, so he set the kettle on the stove and put a coat on right over his pajamas. "You don't want to use the shovel?" he called from the door. She didn't turn, her broad back like an ice block. "I left it there for you. Figured I'd start with the steps and you could take care of the rest." She'd swept the entire porch already, the steps leading down to the back yard, and managed to clear a path to the shed. How long had the woman been up? He stuffed his feet into his boots and walked through the snow. They'd gotten five inches or so, but it might as well have been a foot. This part of Tennessee didn't get snow often, so he knew the roads would be impassable. His pickup had died the summer before, and it rested in the backyard covered in a film of grime. Both he and Udessa preferred the Japanese car. Better gas mileage. Easy to get around in. But he wasn't sure at all how it would do on these roads. He opened the door to the shed wide in order to let in a little sunlight. The sun had only been in the sky about an hour, so the light was still dim. The tools hung neatly on the wall, shortest to longest, a display of Udessa's practical order. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been in the shed—maybe when his mother had visited two years ago and he'd mulched the front beds? Udessa had already taken the shovel down from its long nail on the wall. He picked it up and turned it over in his hands. He reached into his coat pocket for his gloves but came up empty. He couldn't remember where he'd left them. No matter. He'd start shoveling and once he felt his hands go numb, he'd go back in the house and rest a moment. He began to shovel right from where he stood, a second narrow path leading perpendicular to the one she'd etched, between the shed and the place where they parked their car. Once he neared the car, his back ached and he straightened. "Udessa!" he called, remembering the kettle he'd left on the stove. "I already got it." Her deep voice bellowed from inside the house. She was a measured woman in all ways, and he found that comforting. He worked for a few more minutes before his hands began to stiffen. He leaned the shovel against the side of the house, stamped his feet before the door. Inside the back room, he patted his hands together to warm them. "Udessa?" He hung the coat on a hook. Even though it was no longer snowing, the coat felt

wet with cold. He would sit for a moment with his coffee and then go back outside. A little rest. Did Udessa ever rest? Not since he'd known her. So he was surprised to find her lying quietly on the floor before the stove as if she were napping. He stood there for a moment. The wind rattled the kitchen window above the sink, and he turned to it as if someone were trying to get his attention. He stooped and gently touched her face. "Udessa?" he called again. He pushed himself up and grabbed the phone on the counter. He dialed the emergency number, calmly whispered his address, and then sat on the floor beside her to wait. He removed her shoes, placed his arms beneath her and brought her head into his lap. She was heavy, solid, as she'd always been. He didn't think he could carry her if he tried. He placed his cheek against hers and tried to will what little strength he had left into her.

**Dolen Perkins-Valdez** is an associate professor of Literature at American University. She is the author of the best-selling novels *Wench* and *Balm*. Her fiction has appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *StorySouth*, and elsewhere. In 2011, she was a finalist for two NAACP Image Awards and the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award for fiction. She also received the First Novelist Award from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association.