

First Place Short-Short Fiction Prize
~ In the 25th Consecutive NMW Awards ~

Susan Chiavelli
Winter Oranges

Rain drips from a sky as gray as your father's wool sweater. It's the day before Christmas and you haven't seen the sun since late September.

The reading lamp is on even though it's only mid-afternoon. You live for the Mickey Mouse Club after school—for those glimpses of California and the magical kingdom that have melded into one mythic place. Your aunt, the one everyone says you look exactly like, lives in the *Golden State*. At least that's what she calls it in her letters. And you dream of going there someday, even though Mom says forget it. She already went once, to Hollywood before you were born, so she doesn't need to go again. Whenever there's talk of visiting California you look at your father's hopeful face, to see if maybe he'll say what you're wishing for. But he doesn't.

The tinsel covered tree shimmers in front of the big picture window on Christmas Eve. Your mother showed you and your sister how to put each strand of tinsel on, one by one. She says that's the only way to do it. You're not supposed to throw it on in clumps. It's supposed to look like icicles, not an explosion. But you think it looks like rain.

Your father put the lights on first—lights the size of walnuts and of every single color, even blue and orange ones, which are not really Christmasy at all, but more like California colors that somehow look out of place in your living room.

On Christmas Eve you eat the holiday dinner: roast beef (well done), potatoes, peas, and fruit salad with whipping cream dotted with maraschino cherries. Mom makes just enough for everyone to have exactly one helping. She doesn't like leftovers. There's always custard for dessert, for Dad's ulcers. But you and your sister can eat it too.

After dinner your family opens their presents, and you notice how you can watch everyone in the living room window against the shiny black night. It's like watching yourself in an episode of *Twilight Zone* where there are two parallel families, two trees, and twice as many gifts.

It's not a secret that you and your sister have been wishing for music boxes, the kind with pop-up ballerinas. Actually you want dancing lessons, but you know that's not possible, so you'll settle for watching a plastic ballerina dance.

One of your gifts is a round blue music box and your hand trembles when you open the lid. Tinkling music greets you—wish upon a star music—but there's nothing inside but an empty space. You turn it upside down looking for a secret button and when you can't find one, you ask where the ballerina is.

Your mother says they didn't have that kind at Sears. She says it's hard to please an ungrateful child. She opens the pink bubble bath you gave her, says she already has a lot of bubble bath.

Finally, Dad cuts the string on the brown paper package that came all the way from your aunt in Santa Barbara—the mystery box you've examined daily since it arrived—imagining all the possible gifts tucked inside: a map with a red-inked line marking the way to her house? Maybe

even tickets to Disneyland? You hold your breath as he tears off the paper and makes a big production of opening the lid. Ta Da! The box is full of perfect oranges. Citrus scents the air and Dad smiles, but Mom sighs. She looks as if someone has sent her dirt.

“I don’t like food as gifts,” she says, twirling her bracelet as she admires the newest charm Dad gave her, a tiny golden bird. Mom looks at herself in the window, pats her long blonde pageboy into place. “There’s nothing lasting about it.”

Dad laughs at her, the same way he laughs at you when you won’t eat your vegetables. “These aren’t just *any* oranges,” he says. His bear-paw hands reach into the box and he takes one out. He holds it up high in the palm of his hand—as if he’s plucked a miniature sun from the sky.

“This grew on *my* sister’s tree,” he says. “Imagine.” He raises the fruit to his face and inhales the scent. “She just walks out her back door and picks an orange for breakfast—in the *middle of winter*.”

Dad offers the fruit to Mom, but she refuses to take it. She folds her arms and hugs herself tight. When she’s like that nothing will change her mind. Dad’s smile fades, and suddenly your hand reaches out, but he closes his and makes the orange disappear. Then his hand opens slowly, like a flower, and he offers it to you. You take the orange from him, and you breathe in the aroma, exactly the way he did—all the while watching your mother’s face. She gets up from her chair and looks at you as if she doesn’t know who you are.

The music box stops playing. Your family’s caught in the picture window—between your living room and the slippery black night—your sister trying on her new rubber boots, Mom turning away as she leaves the room, and Dad looking outside as raindrops slide down his face.

You move next to him and sit close by—so close that you can’t tell in the reflection where he ends and you begin. You and your father peel your oranges together in silence, slowly, your fingers getting sticky with desire. The first bite is the sweetest, and without even knowing it you let the taste mingle with your dreams of California, until you’ve eaten each slice of the whole, until your dream is something lasting.