



# Half World

Hiromi Goto

*"Half World is a haunting combination of a coming-of-age novel and a spiritual quest, a mad funhouse of horrors and a tale of redemption and love. Wonderfully odd, and quite unforgettable."* NEIL GAIMAN

# Chapter One



Melanie Tamaki pelted around the corner of the damp sidewalk in front of the Rainbow Market. The worn soles of her runners slipping on a wet leaf, she almost fell, but she managed to keep her balance and staggered on.

Something hit her square in the back.

Soft. Squishy. Probably a tomato.

Panting, gasping, Melanie kept on running. She was lucky it wasn't an apple. Apples left bruises. She knew through experience.

"Come back, retard!" a voice jeered.

"Fat crow!" another voice screamed. "We're gonna get you!"

"Lookit her ass move!" they shrieked, teeth gleaming like wolves.

Four, five girls were chasing her. Off the school grounds. Onto the streets.

“Hey!” Melanie heard an old woman’s voice bellow. “Leave her alone! Calling the cops on hooligans and miscreants!”

Despite the fear in her throat, warmth swelled in Melanie’s eyes.

Ms. Wei was always nice to her. Even when it meant that her store would be vandalized on Halloween.

Melanie kept on running, her body heavy, her sides stabbing with pain. She could hear the echo of her tormentors’ footsteps pounding behind her, though it sounded like they were slowing down, losing interest.

A tiny portion of her mind gazed upon her flight with detached humour. What a waste of effort, she thought. If only her gym teacher could time this run, her Phys. Ed. marks would go up....

When she finally pattered to a stop, trembling with exhaustion, she was far beyond her neighbourhood.

Her tormentors were gone.

Panting, gasping, Melanie bent over, almost retching. Her knees quivered with fear and fatigue, and her long black hair clung wet with sweat. She pushed her straggly hair behind her ears and sat down on the curb. Waited, breathed, willing her pounding heart to slow.

Melanie gave a ragged sigh.

There was no point in going back to school. The Valkyries might be waiting for her by the parking lot, and she’d miss most of her Math Essentials, anyway, before ever getting through the door. After that there was only gym. She was too tired to run any laps, and she’d only get in trouble for being a slacker. The kids would make fun of her some more.

Melanie dragged her sleeve under her nose. Was there enough time to take the bus to the used bookstore downtown, and get back home before her mum worried?

Melanie loved Macleod's. Its leaning towers of dusty books teetering up to the ceilings, the mounds of ragged tomes, a great many of them uninteresting and boring, but sometimes among them a wondrous discovery, like an amazingly illustrated anthology of medieval creatures. Or a cookbook from an ancient emperor's banquet. Or a travel-worn volume of edible plants in Patagonia, complete with photographs.... The children's section wasn't really up to date, but Melanie mostly liked to look at nonfiction books with illustrations and read descriptions.

When she had shared her fondness for old books with a radical substitute teacher, she had heard about the store on the edges of a more ragged part of the city. It wasn't the safest area, Ms. Lee cautioned, but most people there did no harm except to themselves. Far more dangerous, she warned, were the people who preyed upon them. Under advisement to go only during the day, Melanie had ventured to the bookstore one rainy Saturday.

And fell in love with the entire place.

It wasn't only the scavenger hunt aspect of the books—she was also intrigued by the quiet people she saw there. In interesting clothing and odd hats, they looked like they had strange and extraordinary private lives, something beyond the mind-numbing routines of school and work.

She never saw any of her classmates at Macleod's.

Melanie squinted at the sun as it moved through patches of dark grey clouds. It was probably too late to get downtown and back before her mother began to wonder where she was. And she

would get caught by the early rush hour. Her mum had looked particularly wan this morning. There was no need to add to her exhaustion unnecessarily, Melanie decided. She would go to the small park near the train tracks, her other special place. She would rest there for a little while before going home.

MELANIE SAT ON AN OLD, DISUSED DOCK, swinging her dangling feet as she stared across the dirty grey water of the inlet. Light speckled over the surface, as the sun moved in and out of clouds. The tide was pushing a yellow plastic bag toward the edge of the rocky shore, which glistened with shards of broken bottles, crumpled aluminum cans. Tankers, silent and inexorable, crept toward the industrial docks. Melanie shivered as the afternoon grew chillier.

*Crack!* Something fell on a large rock near her and Melanie flinched.

Her heart began to pound.

Had her tormentors discovered her sanctuary? Were they throwing stones?

A mussel, shell broken, glistened its pale, wet insides.

Melanie cast furtive looks all around her, but she could see no one. Where did it come from? She frowned, then looked up just as a crow spiraled down. It landed with a swish of wings and hopped toward its prize. The bird stopped before reaching the exposed mussel and tilted its head to one side to peer with one glinting eye at the girl. Melanie gave it a lopsided grin. "Hello, crow friend," she murmured.

Melanie didn't know if the crows began loving her first or if her love had called the crows, but whenever she ventured outdoors



they were nearby. As far back as she could remember. Perched on treetops, on the roof of a building across the street, her dark guardians were never far. The smile fell from her face.

Melanie turned to the water once more and stared at the distant shore. Industrial cranes, with their bright orange legs and long necks, looked like mechanical giraffes. In her peripheral vision she could see the crow hop closer and begin picking at its meal. Melanie's stomach grumbled. She was hungry ... almost hungry enough to try the abundant mussels exposed on the rocks, but she knew the water was filthy with chemicals, tanker sludge and heavy metals. "It's not good for you," she murmured to the crow.

Melanie was very hungry. The fridge had been emptied two days ago, and they had finished the last box of instant mashed potatoes the night before. It wasn't her mum's fault. Melanie blinked. She raised her legs and rested her cheek upon her knees, her black hair falling across her face.

Her mum wasn't well, had never been healthy and strong. Her complexion was always wan, and the dark circles underneath her eyes never faded. She couldn't keep a job for longer than a few months before her body broke and she had to rest in bed for several weeks. For a while Melanie had worried that her mum had leukemia or cancer, maybe AIDS, but when she forced her to go to a clinic all the tests turned out negative.

The past three years her mother had turned to drink....

Melanie sniffed. The material of her jeans smelled slightly sweet, like the fur of a cat come in from the cold. It was time to do laundry.

Melanie knew it was a hard life to be a single mother. In all her memories her mother had been there, never leaving her side. Her

mum had never taken a lover; she never had a boyfriend or girlfriend. When Melanie had asked her why, her mum had smiled sadly. "I'm waiting for the day when I'll see your father once more."

Melanie had been happy to hear that when she was little, but as the years passed and her father never materialized she realized he was probably dead. Her mother had never answered any questions about her father, who he was, where he lived, how they had met. Her mother's eyes would fill with tears, and Melanie would only feel terrible for making her mother cry. There were many things that her mother couldn't tell her, and as time passed, and her mother grew weaker, the problems of the present, like money for groceries, became more pressing.

Were she and her mother in a witness protection program?

You're the best thing that's happened to me for all time, her mum had told Melanie her entire life. She still believed her.

Her cold nose beginning to run, Melanie sniffed again.

*Crack, crack, smack!* More mussels fell from the sky and crows gathered for their feast. Melanie glanced at them with envy. If all she had to worry about was finding enough food to fill her stomach for one day, what a simple life it would be.... The teachers had written her off at school and she'd been streamed into the nonacademic lot, along with most of the other low-income students. So there was very little pressure for her to do much academically. That didn't stop the Valkyries from hazing her every day. And her mum was slowly fading away, as if there were hardly anything of her left.

Melanie shook her head. *My mum is not dying!* she thought fiercely. And I can quit school in a couple of years to get a full-time

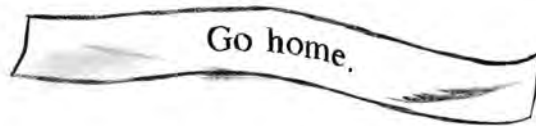
job. Maybe she could find a part-time job in the neighbourhood, for after school and the weekend. They didn't own a lawnmower, and she'd never babysat before, but she could do something like walk rich people's dogs. Dogwalkers didn't have to have nice clothes....

Maybe she should start the long walk home and stop by to chat with Ms. Wei at the Rainbow Market. She wanted to thank her, and maybe, if the store wasn't so busy, she could ask her only friend for some advice. Ms. Wei was not one to proffer advice and Melanie had never asked her for any, but the old woman had seen a lot of life. Over the years Ms. Wei had shared some of her life experiences with her. She might have some good ideas.

A hollow *tock* fell directly upon the grey slats of the old dock. It didn't sound at all like a mussel. Melanie glanced down.

It was a fortune cookie. Neatly split in half. The end of a strip of pink paper fluttered. Melanie looked upward. High above, a crow made a slow, wide spiral. How peculiar, she thought. From that height the cookie should have shattered into bits.

The bird cawed once then flew westward. Melanie reached out and pinched the fortune between her thumb and forefinger. She gently tugged it sideways out of its cookie shell and flattened the slightly furled strip of paper upon her thigh.



Melanie's breath caught in her throat. The crows on the beach had gone silent. They all stared at her with tilted heads, with one

dark and glistening eye. Melanie's heart pounded in her ears. What did it mean? It was just coincidence. It wasn't a *message* message meant for her.

"Hahahahaha," she laughed weakly, for her own benefit.

The dark birds burst upward with a rush of wings. They flew hard and fast after the message-bearing crow that had flown westward.

Fat droplets of rain began to fall.

Melanie leapt to her feet, her heart pounding in her chest. The *plip, plop* of rain slowly accelerated into a low roar.

Melanie thrust the fortune into her jacket pocket.

She began to run.