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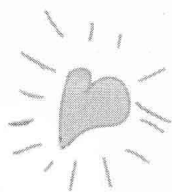


**KIRSTEN MURPHY**

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**KIRSTEN MURPHY**



Penguin Books

## PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (Australia)  
250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia  
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.  
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada)  
90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Canada ON M4P 2Y3  
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd  
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL England

Penguin Ireland  
25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland  
(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd  
11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ)  
67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand  
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd  
24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London, WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Penguin Group (Australia), 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Design by Marina Messiha © Penguin Group (Australia)  
Photograph by Henry King/Getty Images  
Typeset in 11.75/14.75pt Granjon by Post Pre-press Group, Brisbane, Queensland  
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group, Maryborough, Victoria

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Murphy, Kirsten, 1977–

Halfway to good / Kirsten Murphy.

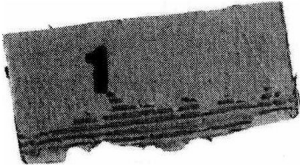
ISBN 978 0 14 300627 5 (pbk.)

1. Interpersonal relations – Juvenile fiction. 2. Self-esteem in children – Juvenile fiction.

A823.4

Lyrics from 'Nightminds' by Missy Higgins on p. vii reprinted by permission of Eleven: A Music Company

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Waiting wasn't anyone's idea of fun. Luke Mitchell wasn't so self-absorbed that he didn't know that. But there was good waiting and there was bad waiting. Good waiting: birthdays, holidays, world peace. Bad waiting: dentists, global warming, death. Waiting at the airport for his parents to return from New Zealand was definitely the bad sort. Luke could guarantee that by the time his family reached the car, they would have begun bickering, or worse still, a moody silence would descend, and he would be left nursing some cumbersome item of luggage for the thirty-minute trip home.

Luke looked down at his feet, admiring his new Vans. He was officially a fan of these shoes. They were definitely what his mother would call *a good buy*, which was important, since he had paid for them with the supermarket money she had left him in her absence. It was amazing how versatile cereal could be. Luke's shoes capped off his effortlessly cool appearance. He had cultivated a healthy glow over the summer and his wavy, sandy-coloured hair had lightened a few shades, as it always did with the advent of the warmer months. His hooded jumper and favourite jeans hung on his broad, muscular torso,

like a catalogue model's, minus the cheesy pose. His mother had always told him that his steely blue eyes were his best feature – like a young Paul Newman, she said. He always felt there was something quite dubious about being compared to a dead guy on a pasta sauce bottle.

Luke wondered what could possibly be taking this guy so long to make a hot chocolate. Not that he minded, if the alternative was waiting with his omnipresent older brother Oliver, who had taken to dropping in on Luke with annoying frequency the fortnight their parents had been away. Oliver wasn't a bad guy, but he was different. His dark cropped hair went perfectly with his impossibly neat appearance and job in IT. He was tall and athletic, with a friendly face that would have typecast him as the good-guy sidekick, were he to attempt a career in Hollywood. The only real physical similarity the brothers shared was their pasta-sauce-bottle eyes. Luke knew there were bound to be differences between them because of their nine-year age gap. But there was something Luke had come to notice about being different – it was fine, as long as it wasn't in your face.

He collected his hot chocolate and headed back to wait.

'What was the hold up?' Oliver asked.

'He was,' Luke said, pointing to the beanie-wearing, air-guitar-playing vendor. Luke stirred his drink. 'Great. Marshmallows.'

'You don't like marshmallows?'

'I'm allergic to them.'

'Really? I didn't know that.'

'That's strange because it's pretty interesting.' Luke could feel the obnoxiousness oozing from his pores, but he couldn't stop himself. 'Here,' he said, handing the drink to his brother.

'You don't want to get another one?'

'I don't think we have that kind of time.'

'So,' Oliver said. 'I was thinking I might teach you how to drive.'

Luke did not provide Oliver with the response he was hoping for. 'Why?'

'What do you mean, "why"? So you can drive.'

'You're not worried about the carbon footprint? Pollution, congestion, destruction of the earth as we know it?'

'The offer is there, if you're ever feeling less argumentative.' Oliver noticed Luke's new shoes. 'Where did you get those?'

'Don't know,' Luke said.

'You've had them for what – a week? Two weeks? And you don't remember where you brought your shoes?'

'I don't know. Some random place in the city.'

'Some random place? What does that even mean, Luke?'

'It's bought, anyway.'

'What?'

'You said brought. It's bought.'

'I didn't.'

'You did.'

'Whatever, Luke.'

'Whatever? What does that even mean, Oliver?'

A sporting team began to file past them into the arms of waiting loved ones. Luke watched as a man hugged a child who single-handedly debunked the universal belief that all babies are beautiful.

'Well, they're cool,' Oliver said.

Luke was confused for a moment. 'We're still on the shoes, right? I got them at a place where I'm pretty sure you can't buy chickens or cows for citizens of the Third World, so you probably wouldn't be interested.'

‘You said you liked the cow.’

Oliver had bought all of his previous year’s Christmas gifts at his local Oxfam store, always one to follow his social conscience, no matter what the occasion. Luke had secretly thought that it was cool to give a cow to a village, but he’d also wished that he could have scored the T-shirt he’d wanted. He was, after all, seventeen. ‘You act like I’m some kind of crusader. I’m just trying to do my part, Luke.’

‘Me too,’ Luke said.

‘You know, this could be the last time we ever do this,’ Oliver said, looking thoughtfully into the distance.

‘Fingers crossed, yeah.’

‘No,’ Oliver said. ‘I mean *this*. All of us *together*.’ He touched Luke lightly on the arm and nodded meaningfully. This, combined with the older-brother earnestness in Oliver’s voice, made Luke want to punch him.

Luke looked back at Oliver and smiled, ignoring the ominous subtext. ‘Fingers crossed, yeah.’

The look on Oliver’s face made Luke wish he had kept his mouth shut. But he was tired and incapable of pretending right now.

‘You know that if you ever want to talk about any of this . . .’ Oliver began.

‘I don’t.’

‘There they are,’ Oliver said, as their parents appeared from behind the sliding doors. ‘Dad looks good. He’s got a bit of colour in his cheeks.’

‘Yeah,’ Luke said without even looking up. He turned and began walking in the opposite direction. ‘Be back in a minute.’

‘What are you doing?’

Luke continued walking.

'Luke?' Oliver called again. 'Where are you going?'

'To pee.'

A group of nuns eyed him with disapproval.

When he got to the men's toilets he pushed the door open with his foot, the germs exposé of a current affairs program still fresh in his mind. He went into the last cubicle and closed the door, careful not to touch any surfaces. 'Not now,' he sighed. 'Please not now.' He put the toilet lid down and sat, resting his head in his hands, concentrating on his breathing. This had happened a couple of times now, but he had been all right. He reminded himself of this as he closed his eyes, trying to clear his mind of everything, thinking only of getting enough air into his lungs and making the stars he was seeing disappear. But hearing the inconsistent rhythm of his breathing only made him more anxious. His short, sharp intakes of oxygen were somehow not registering, and much as he tried, he couldn't make them longer or deeper. He wondered whether it was possible to drown on land. Or maybe he was having a heart attack at the age of seventeen. That must have happened to someone somewhere before. He unzipped his hoodie and took off his long-sleeved T-shirt, leaving only his singlet. But it was still too warm, suffocating. He hugged his knees to his chest and waited, hoping that the awful feeling would pass as quickly as it had come.

'Luke, are you still in there?' he heard Oliver say after a while.

Luke snapped into action, getting to his feet. He flushed the toilet, put his T-shirt back on and walked out to wash his hands.

'What are you doing? You've been ages.'

'Sorry, I went via the music store. They had a sale.'

Oliver looked at him with disbelief. 'Come on then.'



Luke went to use the hand dryer, but his brother's intense glare made him think better of it. He could deal with Oliver being annoyed with him, especially if it meant that he didn't have to think about what had just happened; how it wasn't the first time, how he had no control over when or where it happened, and how, each time, it was getting worse.

On her way to school Anna McIntyre thought about the day she had last seen Tom Sullivan. It had been more than a year, but she could still remember every detail. She didn't like to brag, but remembering excruciating moments in excruciating detail was kind of her thing. She had known that it was over for a long time. She had prepared herself for it to be true, telling herself that the signs were not good, as if this would somehow lessen the fallout. On the way to see him, Anna had been resolute. No matter what, she would be fine. She always was. She was prepared for the worst, which had to count for something. But as she had walked up his driveway, she had felt it. Against all logic, it had emerged, an unstoppable, cruel inkling of hope. 'Not helpful,' she'd sighed, hating herself for feeling it.

The talk itself had gone well. It was all down to timing; he was not long out of a long, messy relationship and was still recovering. It was a nice, calm talk as far as these discussions went. They'd sat in the park, surrounded by struggling, drought-affected oak trees, happy children and mocking sunshine. No one was angry or yelling and she hadn't even cried.

As they'd sat there, drinking their cokes, she'd kept getting glimpses of the boy she had fallen in love with. A boy who used words like 'placate' and picked up rubbish that wasn't his, to spare ducks he would never meet from the perils of strangulation. As Anna had come closer to leaving, she had felt herself growing emptier by the second, wishing that they could keep the sun still; that they might stay there in that moment together. The emptiness had soon dissipated and that was when the aching had begun. It was funny, Anna thought, you never saw that on coke ads.

Luke sat in the kitchen, reading the newspaper as he ate his breakfast. This time yesterday he had been in bed enjoying his last day of summer holidays. He had slept for most of the day, partly because he enjoyed the novelty of not having his mother there to tell him to get up and out into the sunshine, and partly because he had felt like he needed to. He never seemed to feel rested lately, no matter how long he stayed in bed. He felt like he was playing a permanent game of catch up, as if he'd had a few big nights with no chance to re-energise. He would wake up tired and vow that he would get the sleep he needed that night, and when that didn't work, he'd plan for the next.

'There you go, love,' his mother said, putting a cup of coffee in front of him. 'Toast?'

'No thanks, Mum.'

'Are you sure?' she asked, attacking the table with the cloth.

He picked up his bowl and mug so that she wouldn't have to wipe around them.

She grabbed the newspaper in front of him. 'I hate this table. It never looks clean.'

Their kitchen table was an original from the sixties that

Mr Mitchell's mother had given her son when he was a newly-wed. It had chipped, pink-and-white swirly laminex with silver edging, and had come with four white vinyl chairs, which had grown increasingly tatty over the years. Luke had assured his mother that the setting was very cool in a retro way, but he knew she longed for new furniture. When Luke looked at photos of himself and his brother in their house as they were growing up, the only thing that ever looked any different was them. His parents had done nothing to their brown-brick seventies house since moving in, nearly thirty years ago. The only time Mr Mitchell ever allowed the purchase of new appliances or items of furniture was when something had broken, stopped working, or in the case of their first microwave, caught fire.

The rest of the kitchen had dark faux wood cupboards, tangerine laminex and a yellow hexagonal linoleum floor, with several chunks missing, courtesy of Oliver's golfing phase. The family room still sported original shag pile, which Luke's best friend Alexi thought was hilarious, partly because of the way it looked and partly because of the word 'shag'. And the lounge room was dominated by a tired, olive-green couch, complete with a tear down one side, again thanks to Oliver. Bright yellow-and-green curtains, with a bamboo design, which should have long since been relegated to a holiday house, framed the floor to ceiling windows, while several Sidney Nolan reproductions sat uneasily on the apricot walls.

Luke's house was perched at the end of a court between two near-identical homes. The only things that differentiated the houses were the cars parked under the carports and Mrs Mitchell's cottage garden, which was a departure from the water-wise, native shrubbery that dominated most of their neighbours' front yards. They lived in the outer-eastern suburbs of Melbourne in a place that strangers had rarely heard

of, or when they thought they had, found they'd mixed it up with a suburb much further out. That seemed to be Luke's life, though; it always required further explanation.

'There it is,' Luke's father said, putting what looked like a postcard of a jet boat on the fridge.

Luke's mother took an invitation down and passed an extra magnet to her husband.

'You can't take Aunty Gwynne's silver wedding anniversary invite down, Mum. It hasn't even happened yet, has it?' Luke stirred. 'Isn't that bad luck or something?'

'Bad luck would be having to go,' Mr Mitchell said, offering a wry smile.

'Why the woman insists on making every function fancy dress, I'll never understand,' Mrs Mitchell added.

'I'd dress up as often as I could too, if I had her hair,' Luke said.

'I'd dress up that often if I had her husband,' his mother laughed. 'Somehow Uncle Terry looks like less of a cretin when he's not in his own clothes. But there is no way we're going.'

'She is your sister, Mum. You should really make an effort.'

'Put it this way,' Mrs Mitchell said, 'if your dad and I go, then you go too.'

Luke picked up the invitation from the table. 'I'll put it in the recycling on my way out, shall I?'

'Take a look at this photo, Luke,' Mr Mitchell said, still standing by the fridge.

Luke picked up his bowl of cornflakes and walked over to where his father stood, looking closely at the picture. 'Hang on, that's you and Mum. You two went jet boating?'

Mr Mitchell smiled. 'We did. Your mother has the bruises

to prove it. It was great, apart from the annoying Americans behind us.'

'They were from Idaho,' Luke's mother said, laughing. 'They wore matching tracksuits.'

'Classy. You didn't mention anything about this last night. Then it was all "we saw grass-skirt factories and museums". Where's the bungee-jumping shot then?' Luke asked.

'We didn't go quite that far,' his mother said.

Luke looked at the picture again. He couldn't believe that his parents were capable of doing anything remotely adventurous. It just wasn't them. It both impressed and unnerved him. People usually did uncharacteristic things for three reasons: either they were experiencing a mid-life or post-new-year crisis, or they were dying.

'We'll have to all go next time,' Mrs Mitchell said, as if she knew what Luke was thinking.

'The driver looks like a bit of a tool,' Luke said, re-examining the picture.

His mother rolled her eyes with disapproval. 'Luke.'

'He was,' Mr Mitchell said. 'He was the whole toolbox.' He picked up his tatty briefcase and kissed his wife on the cheek. 'See you in a couple of hours.'

'Straight home after your meeting, Rob,' she said.

'Yes. See you about eleven thirty. Bye, mate,' Mr Mitchell said.

'Bye, Dad.'

Mr Mitchell had worked at the same accountancy firm for thirty years, with its mustard velour couch, panelled walls, dreary partitions and array of indoor plants, ranging from the mildly dead, to the firmly afterlife bound. Luke's dad had spent the better part of the last two decades giving his own paraphrased version of the Marlon Brando 'I could have been

a contender' speech from *On the Waterfront*, explaining to Luke how he could have been a surgeon, a doctor, a journalist, but life had got in the way. Luke had felt guilty about that for a while, thinking he and Oliver had somehow impeded their father's success. But more recently he had begun to wonder about his father's vague assertions and whether he would have been happy doing anything. It seemed to Luke that some people had a kind of knack for making the most of life and creating happiness in all sorts of circumstances. He really hoped he could be one of them.

Luke's mother watched as her husband reversed out of the driveway. 'Dad's going to be at the hospital tonight. I've left some spaghetti sauce defrosting for your dinner.'

Luke put his breakfast bowl in the sink. 'Is he having more chemo already?'

'Yes. When we planned the trip the doctor said he'd need to have his next round pretty quickly after we got back. It's only the usual – nothing to worry about.'

'I didn't realise. I probably should have said good luck or something.'

'Dad knows you care. Darling, why don't you stay home today? You had a late night picking us up. You look tired.' She put her hand to his face, gently stroking his cheek.

'I am tired.' He looked into her pale blue eyes and swept her dark fringe out of her eyes.

'I need to get it cut. No time.' She smiled. 'I don't even want to think about how many grey hairs I have coming through.'

'Yeah, actually quite a few,' he teased, looking at her hair as he towered over her.

She tapped him on the arm. 'I wish I'd had girls. They're so much nicer to their poor mothers.' She looked up at him. 'You've grown again. Stop it.'

‘Sorry. When are you going back to work?’

‘Tomorrow,’ she said, looking exhausted at the thought of it. Mrs Mitchell was a community nurse and one of the most capable people Luke had ever known.

It was the curse of all nurses’ children that they usually needed to be on their death beds before they were allowed to stay home from school. This made it all the more strange that she was offering him a day off now.

‘Did I tell you Alex had a meltdown the other day when he thought he found a grey chest hair,’ Luke said.

His mother relaxed, leaning back on the sink, with her cup of tea. ‘And was it?’

‘No. It was his cat’s hair.’

‘That horrible chinchilla?’

‘Yeah, Anastasia. She’s better since they put her on medication. She’s hissing less and she almost never bites anymore.’

‘When your cat’s taking more tablets than you, it’s time to go,’ she laughed. ‘I was thinking we might go to the Picasso exhibition in the next couple of weeks if you’re free.’

‘I’m working Saturdays at Geek Headquarters for the next couple of months, but we could go on a Sunday.’

She smiled. ‘You really shouldn’t call it that.’

Luke had a part-time job at Games Headquarters, a store that specialised in all things *Warhammer* and *Star Wars*, and other nerd-related pursuits. One of his mother’s friend’s husbands owned it and had offered Luke a job. It was a definite step up from working at Chickadees Charcoal Chicken, so he had accepted. Sometimes Alex would come and keep Luke company during his shifts, marvelling at the intricacies of the nerd species. Alex made no secret of the fact that the main reason for his visits was to feel superior to whole generations of saddo teenage boys and older men.



Mrs Mitchell began loading the dishwasher. 'Do you want to come to the hospital tonight?'

'I would, but I can't really. I told Alex I'd help him with his holiday homework for English.'

'Shouldn't he have already done that?'

Luke smiled. 'Mum, it's Alex. Maybe I'll come with you to the hospital next time.'

'That's fine. Your brother said he might drop in at some stage.'

'Drop in here?'

'Yes.'

'Great.' He loaded his schoolbag onto his back.

Mrs Mitchell handed him his lunch. 'That bag looks too heavy, Luke. I think I'd better drive you.'

'No, really, Mum, I'll be fine. I'll take a few out.' He took out a pile of exercise books and his maths and biology text books.

She smiled. 'Better. You're sure you don't want to stay home?'

'Yes. I'd better go.'

The concern on his mother's face made Luke wish he wasn't such a bad son. A good son would go to school and not impersonate his sick father on the telephone. A good son would not grunt at his well-intentioned brother or be annoyed by his sad mother. A good son would go to the airport to collect his parents and stay to greet them, instead of running away. A good son would be more like Oliver.

'Promise me you're okay,' his mother said.

Luke opened the back door and kissed her gently on the forehead. 'I promise, Mum.' As he closed the door, he noticed a wine cask sitting on the end of the bench in the usual position. He had put it in the cupboard for the two weeks his father was