

"A story about feeling different...
Insightful and funny and gently
poignant." —Pip Williams, author of
The Dictionary of Lost Words



LIFE HACKS
FOR A
LITTLE
ALIEN

ALICE FRANKLIN

A Novel

L I F E H A C K S
F O R
A L I T T L E
A L I E N

Alice Franklin



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston London

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2025 by Alice Franklin

Cover design and art by Gray318

Cover copyright © 2025 Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

littlebrown.com

First North American Edition: February 2025

Originally published in the United Kingdom by riverrun: February 2025

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not

owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or email hachettespeakers@hbgusa.com.

Little, Brown and Company books may be purchased in bulk for business, educational, or promotional use. For information, please contact your local bookseller or the Hachette Book Group Special Markets Department at special.markets@hbgusa.com.

ISBN 9780316576055 (hc) / 9780316594769 (Canadian pb) /
9780316576079 (ebook)
LCCN 2024949561

E3-20241219-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Part One](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

9

10

11

Part Two

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

Part Three

29

30

31

32

33

34

35

36

37

Part Four

[38](#)

[39](#)

[40](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Discover More](#)

[About the Author](#)

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

[Tap here to learn more.](#)



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

PROLOGUE

YOU ARE SITTING ON the living room floor, spooning strawberry yoghurt onto the carpet. On the carpet, an insect crawls. Your mum asks what you're doing even though it's obvious what you're doing – you're spooning strawberry yoghurt onto the carpet where an insect crawls.

'What are you doing?' your mum asks. Her question is rhetorical but you don't know the meaning of rhetorical, let alone how to identify something rhetorical.

'I'm dying a spider,' you say.

You're three years old, and these are your first words. Your mum doesn't react. She doesn't look pleased or surprised. Instead, she gets up from the sofa and leaves the room, thinking about a book she has borrowed from the library – a book titled *So Your Child Is a Psychopath*. She is worried. Did you know you've worried your mum? Your first-ever sentence was a catastrophe. Did you know it was a catastrophe?

Let me explain. Firstly, that's not a spider; the tiny creature on the carpet is a beetle. Not all tiny creatures are spiders. Calling a beetle 'spider' is a silly mistake. However, I can probably let this go. After all, this kind of thing is common in the early stages of language acquisition. Children might call every insect 'spider', every female 'mum', and every spherical fruit 'orange'. This phenomenon is called overextending.¹ Overextending is just one of the reasons children are funny. And by funny, I mean strange and a little bit dim.

I don't know if I can forgive your verb choice, though. 'Dying' is an intransitive verb that cannot be followed by a direct object such as 'spider'. The verb you're looking for is 'kill'. You were supposed to say, 'I'm killing a spider that is actually a beetle.'

But is 'killing' even the right word here? This beetle won't necessarily be killed by the yoghurt globs. It will be maimed for sure, but killed? It might have been more apt to say: 'I am trying to kill this spider that is actually a beetle, but maybe I'll just maim it instead.'

That said, I imagine your mum isn't that worried about you overextending the odd noun or messing up the odd verb. I imagine she's just worried you are a psychopath. Like many parents, she places undue weight on her child's first words. She considers them a Very Significant Event. Your cousin's first word was 'moon'. This pleased your auntie. She thought it was a very significant event. She thought it meant he would become a well-paid astrophysicist.ⁱⁱ

But now your mum is flicking through *So Your Child Is a Psychopath* and all she imagines for you is a short career as a vandal followed by a long stretch behind bars. Don't worry too much. Parents are funny. And by funny, I mean strange and a little bit dim.

As it happens, I'm not dim. I'm a linguist,ⁱⁱⁱ and as a very smart linguist, I can say your mum is right to be worried. There is something wrong with you. I know this for certain. Something is wrong with you. Something is wrong with you right now as you sit on the carpet still holding the yoghurt pot. The yoghurt pot is empty and the beetle is still. You are contemplating the beetle, which is still. Stop contemplating the beetle. The beetle is so still, it is unlikely it will ever move again.

Look at me. I know you understand. Your vocabulary is enormous, or to be precise, your passive vocabulary is enormous and your active vocabulary is shite. I know having something wrong with you sounds scary, but don't worry. At least, not for the time being.

Hey, stop crying. Would it help if I told you a story? I have a really great one up my sleeve. It's all about you – everything you see and everything you do.

Sound good? Climb up here, Little Alien. Sit next to me. I will tell you about life on this planet. I will tell you how it goes.

Further reading:

So Your Child Is a Psychopath

Footnotes

- i Under-extending happens too. Sometimes kids think the only orange in the world is the one they have just eaten and are baffled when there is more fruit by the same name.
- ii Your cousin's first word was not a very significant event. He won't be an astrophysicist or an astro-anything. He's not so bright, that kid.
- iii Linguists are language experts. They are people who know a lot about language. They are not necessarily people who know how to speak a lot of languages, or even people who know a lot about linguine, which is a type of pasta.

Part One

IT GOES LIKE THIS. You won't be normal. Aliens can't be normal. You'll be normal enough, though. And by this, I mean you'll have just enough normal to seem normal without actually being normal.

Let me explain. Like normal human children, you'll disregard every grammatical irregularity that comes your way. You'll say things like 'I goed to school with my mum', 'I eated the orange', and 'Colouring in is funner than skipping'.

If I were a prescriptivist, I would lambast you for these flagrant over-regularisations.ⁱ But as it happens, I am not a prescriptivist, I am a descriptivist.ⁱⁱ And as a descriptivist, I applaud you. 'Goed' is more logical than 'went'. 'Eated' is more logical than 'ate'. 'Funner' is more logical than 'more fun' and it's a funner expression to boot. These assertions would chime with the internal grammars of many small humans. You're blending in. Well done.

But you're still wrong. 'Goed' and 'eated' and 'funner' aren't words. You won't find them in reputable dictionaries or even disreputable dictionaries. They're wrong. You're wrong. You're wrong all the time and you can't help it.

Let me explain. On your first day of school, you look cute in your tiny stripy tie. You go into the classroom, looking cute, holding your dad's hand – something that's also cute. When he lets go of your hand, you cling on to his elbow. When he shakes his elbow free, you wrap your entire body around his legs. When he wriggles you off him, he disappears out the door and you panic.

You are panicked. You don't know what to do. There are other children. The other children are busy. The other children are doing seemingly random activities. You wonder if you should join in with the seemingly random

activities, but you don't know which activity to choose. Do you Play-Doh or colour in? Do you sandpit or clay? Do you Jenga or glockenspiel?

All these questions – or the absence of any answers to these questions – make your throat feel weird and your eyes well up. You're upset. This is what happens when you're upset. You don't know that yet, though. Your little body is still a mystery to you.

The teacher comes over, but only at a leisurely speed. For a human, she is not in very good condition. She is old and creaks when she walks. Slowly, she eases herself down to your level until her head is at your height. She asks if you're OK.

'Are you OK?' she asks.

You don't know if you're OK because you don't know what 'OK' means in this context. You don't currently have any unmet physiological needs. You don't need to eat or sleep or drink or pee. Does that mean you're OK?

'Do you want to play with Henry?' the teacher asks.

You wipe your nose on your sleeve. 'Henry' is just another word you do not understand.

'Let's go find Henry.'

The teacher prods you gently in the direction of outside. When you get outside, she prods you in the direction of the sandpit. When you get to the edge of the sandpit, she prods you until you step into the sandpit.

'Here's Henry,' the teacher says.

In the sandpit, there are three boys. One has red hair, one has brown hair, and one is blond. One of these boys must be Henry, but the teacher doesn't tell you which one. The three boys stare at you. You wonder if you have a Cheerio stuck on your forehead. You ate Cheerios that morning and it wouldn't be the first time one of them got stuck on your forehead, it would be the second. You rub your forehead. There is no Cheerio.

The teacher tells you she's going to leave you with Henry now.

'I'm going to leave you with Henry now,' the teacher says. 'Don't throw anything. If sand gets into anyone's eye, they'll have to go to hospital. Cheerio.'

When the teacher is gone, you stand with your arms at your sides while you sway, wondering if 'Henry' is the collective noun for a group of feral children.

At some point, the boy with red hair speaks.

'Why is she just standing there?' he asks.

Ten minutes later, you are covered in sand, standing in the creaky teacher's office. Your teacher is looking at you through her glasses. The glasses have a magnifying quality. They make her look like one of those animals with massive eyes.ⁱⁱⁱ

The teacher is talking to you about being nice. She is saying things like 'It's nice to be nice' and 'We don't attack each other with sand in this classroom'. You do not dignify these banalities with a nod, let alone a verbal response. In the end, the teacher tells you she is going to call your dad. She tells you this twice, and twice you do not care.

'I'm going to call your dad,' she says. 'I'm going to call your dad right now.' When your dad answers the phone, the teacher changes her tone. What was once a nasal drone is now a breathy singsong that makes her sound manically chipper, as if she's determined to have a really good time despite life being despicable. 'Your daughter is not saying anything... We didn't know she was... We really need to know... We need to know if children don't... No, she's not speaking at all... She's also just attacked several other children... Sand...'

You're pissed off when your dad arrives. You know this because you feel like frowning. You look at your dad, frowning. Your dad looks at you but he's not frowning. He doesn't say anything. He just starts walking you home. While he is walking you home, you want to ask him what on earth he was thinking, sending you to a school where they don't even teach you how to read. But then he asks you if you want pizza for tea.

'Do you want pizza for tea?' he asks.

You nod. Even though you ate pizza yesterday, another pizza can't hurt.

‘What do you say?’

In most families, when an adult asks a child what do you say, it means ‘Don’t be a little shit, say please’ or ‘Say thank you, you little shit’. In your family, however, it just means you are required to speak.

‘Yes,’ you say.

‘What do you say?’

‘Yes, please.’

Further reading:

Is Homeschooling Right for Your Child?

An Introduction to Literacy for Illiterate Kids

Bushbabies: Why the Massive Eyes?

Footnotes

i Prescriptivists are people who think there are right and wrong ways to use language. They wince at aspirated aitches and moan about unsightly neologisms. They can be a bit annoying.

ii Descriptivists are people who study how language is actually used. They embrace the unrelenting sea of language change as neither a sign of progress nor a sign of decay. They can also be a bit annoying.

iii Bushbabies.

YOU DO NOT LAST very long at this particular school. And when I say this, I am employing a technique called ‘litotes’ – something that means you really don’t last very long at all.

One Tuesday morning, your normal teacher is off sick. Another teacher is standing in. This teacher is not in control of you. She is not in control of anyone.

You are sitting next to a kid called Joe and a kid called Louis. The three of you are doing arts and crafts. You hold the safety scissors carefully, cut shapes out of the cardboard. The kid called Joe then sticks these shapes to another piece of cardboard. After this, the kid called Louis pours quantities of PVA glue over everything, and everyone heaps glitter everywhere. It’s teamwork. It’s dreamwork. It’s art, but only kind of.

But lo! In the corner over there, a kid called Rebecca has just had an accident. By this, I mean she has just done a wee while still wearing her clothes. She is doing a lot of crying about this as she waddles around uncomfortably, her legs wide like a cowboy.

Even though such things go with the territory of teaching young children, the teacher seems alarmed by Rebecca’s accident. She asks the assistant to take Rebecca out of the classroom and guide her somewhere – anywhere – else.

‘Can you help her out the room?’ she asks the assistant.

The assistant, an old, uncooperative woman, looks at the teacher for a few seconds. ‘Where do you want me to take her?’

‘The nurse’s room, maybe?’ the teacher says.

The assistant shakes her head. ‘I don’t know if this merits a trip to the nurse’s room.’