

MARC DE BEL

THE
PRICKLE
SISTERS

TRANSLATED BY

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CONTENTS

PART 1	The Little Prickles	9
	1. The Birth of the Prickle Sisters	11
	2. The Preschool Prickles	14
	3. A Staggering Record in School History	17
	4. Joel	19
	5. Grandma Diana	21
	6. Paradis Papillon	23
	7. Back to School	27
	9. Joel's Third Birthday	31
	10. The Fire	39
PART 2	The Prickles in Primary School	45
	1. Monday, June 19 th	47
	2. The Greenfinch	52
	3. On Flashers and Other Dangerous Beasts	57
	4. Greenfinch Soup à la Prickle	60
	5. Punishment	62
	6. Pudding With Ketchup	68
	7. 'Be Kind to the Animals'	74
	8. White Roses and Bird Revenge	77
	9. Sausage	81
	10. The Ghost Mill	85
	11. Lights and Rabbits in the Graveyard	93
	12. The Werewolf Zombie	98
	13. We Travel to Learn! Hola Dee Day!	102
	14. Rock 'N' Roll With the Prickle Sisters!	107
	15. Triplets Are Also Exceptional Among Baboons	114
	16. The Taipan	117

17. 'Take a Quick Bite of NITE!'	120
18. Dean in the Lion's Den	123
19. DREAMLAND Amusement Park	127
20. The Devil's Fortress	133
21. The Prickle Fortress	136
22. The Black Shadow	143
PART 3 Miss Irons	147
1. The Next Morning	149
2. The Crikey-Attic Evaluation of Hallotitiral Behaviour	152
3. Unexpected Visit	157
4. Miss Lucy	159
5. A Flaming Idea	164
6. Easy-Peasy ... Or is it?	168
7. A Midsummer Night's Birthday Surprise	171
8. Settling an Old Score	177
9. What's Learnt in the Cradle ...	187
10. 'I Know Someone Who Believes in Me!'	189
11. Summer Holidays	195
PART 4 Two Months Later	197
1. Friday, September 1 st	199
2. Einstein	202
3. The Bison	205
4. Rock	208
5. Luxor	209
6. Spaghetti à la Prickle	216
7. The SteelKid Triathlon	218
8. The Gothic Shop	220
9. Victorian Puff Dresses	224
10. Monopoly	227

PART 5	Billy Clifford, aka Spicky Spike	231
1.	FACTS	233
2.	Patchouli, Marshmallows, and Chicken Drumsticks.	237
3.	Gorillas in the Fog	241
4.	Jean Dubois	243
5.	Ransom	247
6.	Fire Sacrifices	249
7.	Tree Branch	257
8.	Jasper	260
 Chapter 8		
	The Prickle Games	267

*'A story based on peculiar events for readers with
nerves of steel and bent to laugh.'*

— Peter Penneback

'Lovely to get back together with the sisters!!!'

— Vera Vos, childhood Prickle-fan

*Some incredibly wise people claim that children
choose their parents themselves. If that is true (and
as a father of five, I believe it all too readily), then
the Prickle sisters made a stupendously stupid choice
nine months before they were born. But those clever
mind-moulding whiz kids would argue otherwise.
Children are always right. They always pick out
exactly the pair of parents they need.*

'What if reality becomes fantasy?'

— Johannes Neveldauw

'What you give, you get back threefold.'

— Old witch's spell

Part 1

The Little Prickles

1. *The Birth of the Prickle Sisters*

Willy Prickle's eyes nearly fell out of their sockets when, immediately after the birth of his first tot, a second, identical screamer emerged. And when a third also appeared, the brand-new dad collapsed on the spot.

'Must be the emotions,' the kind nurse mused.

It took more than half a bottle of seven-year-old, barrel-aged Scotch whisky to bring Father Prickle back to the land of the living.

Meanwhile, Mother Prickle had called her best friend. After all, she had also given up her newly born and – to her taste – far too freckled son to a foster family. However, the woman happened to know that the monthly child benefits for three kids added up to more than Father Prickle's shaky salary.

So, it was quickly decided to keep the triplets. Learning about this happy news, Father Prickle happily toasted to his new triple source of income and threw back the rest of the whisky in one gulp.

'Bloody hell,' Mother Prickle grunted. 'Now we don't have to come up with one, but three names.' Thinking was not exactly her strong suit. 'What are we going to call those girls, Willy?' she asked her husband.

Father Prickle shrugged indifferently. 'You make something up.' He sighed. 'I need a minute to recover. Move that butt of yours a bit, darling.'

He got comfortable next to his wife in the creaking maternity bed and fell asleep instantly.

At that exact moment, the three sisters opened their hungry mouths at the same time. The wailing gave their groggy father a splitting headache. Alarmed, he tumbled out of the bed, while Mother Prickle stuffed both her index fingers deep into her ears and closed her eyes so she could think.

A strong scent of medicine wriggled into her nostrils.

She looked up, startled, when she suddenly saw someone by her bedstand.

‘Oh, I hadn’t seen you come in, doctor.’

‘Lucy, Cindy, and Fergy,’ the tall, slender man said. His voice resembled the cawing of a crow. He looked at the babies intensely and stood in such a way that he cast a shadow over them.

The girls started screaming even louder.

‘Why, yes.’ Mother Prickle smiled. ‘Lucy, Cindy and Fergy. That’s nice. What do you think, Willy?’

‘Hmmm? What? Fine by me,’ Father Prickle replied as he snoozed on the floor, next to the bed.

A nurse came in reply to the children’s wails. Visibly irritated, she snorted and opened the window. Father Prickle felt the sharp tip of her shoe tap against his shoulder reprimandingly.

‘You can’t smoke in here, sir,’ she said.

Confused, Willy Prickle stood up and banged his head against the edge of the bed.

‘What?’

‘I said you can’t smoke in here,’ the nurse repeated bitterly.

‘But I don’t even smoke,’ Willy Prickle protested.

‘No? Then where is this wretched sulphur smell coming from?’ the nurse wondered.

‘Lucy, Cindy and Fergy ...?’ Mother Prickle thought aloud.

‘Is that what you’re going to call them, ma’am?’ the nurse asked with a smile.

‘Yes.’ Mother Prickle nodded. ‘The doctor here just gave me that tip.’

The nurse looked around the room, puzzled.

‘Doctor? Which doctor, ma’am?’

Mother Prickle only now noticed that the tall, slender man had disappeared.

‘Well, the one from earlier. That lanky guy with the dark moustache.’

‘Lanky guy with a dark moustache?’ the nurse echoed in surprise.

‘Yes, he was standing here by my bed when you entered the room.’

The nurse frowned and shook her head. ‘There was no one here when I came in, ma’am,’ she said. ‘Besides, no doctor in this hospital has a moustache.’

Her words, however, were drowned out by the deafening screams from the triplets.

‘Shhh ... tut, tut, tut,’ the nurse soothed.

She leaned comfortably over the cots, in which the sisters ranted and raved like little jack-in-the-boxes.

2. *The Preschool Prickles*

The sisters didn't exactly make it easy for Father and Mother Prickle. During the day, in between their crying fits, they would occasionally sleep a little. But as soon as the sun went down, they howled incessantly until the early hours.

'Those mongrels really can't be quieted,' Mother Prickle grumbled to her best friend. 'They only shut up when their nanny holds and cuddles them. But there's no way I'm doing that! And to make matters worse, they have now learnt to pick off the bandages I use to tape their mouths shut. And when they taste the crushed sleeping pills in their fruit porridge, they spit the whole mess back in my face. They're monsters! I really can't stand it any longer ...'

Father Prickle, too, was at a loss. The bags under his eyes grew bigger and bigger, just like the pile of empty liquor bottles in the cellar.

In the end, Mother Prickle resorted to stuffing the kids with tons of sweets, mountains of cakes, and boxes full of pastries. She hoped this would calm her overwrought nerves.

But it was all in vain. Barely four months after the sisters were born, the desperate woman already weighed one hundred and twenty-three kilograms.

When the girls started teething and the nocturnal screaming increased, both parents realised that this could not go on any longer. They moved their own beds to the basement and their children's to the farthest corner of the attic.

But the worst was yet to come when the sisters started crawling. Awkwardly at first, on their bellies like newborn seals. Then on their hands and knees, like young turtles. And finally, fast and agile on their hands and feet, like overgrown crocodiles, using their brand-new, razor-sharp teeth to destroy – no, *pulverise* – everything in sight.

The wooden crib was the first to perish under the sisters' relentless nibbling. This was followed by the Mickey-Mouse carpet, the second-hand bunk bed, the kitchen table, and pretty much all the other pieces of furniture, which were bought for next to nothing at the thrift shop.

'It'll pass,' the nanny claimed, just before she fell through a half-eaten chair and had to be rushed to the ER with a severe concussion.

Eventually, there was nothing left in the whole house to bite into. But every time something new entered the Prickles' house, the sisters immediately sank their teeth into it. The grey poodle of a passing Jehovah's Witness didn't even get the chance to bite back.

And things went from bad to much, much worse. After all, when the girls learnt to walk, it freed up their little hands.

Within a week, no less than two plumbers, three carpenters, four electricians, five plasterers, and seventeen specialist drain unblockers had to come in. And one psychiatrist, Dr Nuts, the best in the country.

However, after thoroughly examining the trio, the highly educated professor and his team of assistants

were faced with a bona fide three-part conundrum. The tests showed that the triplets did not have the slightest sense of the difference between right or wrong. Moreover, the sisters didn't have a shred of innate respect for anything or anyone either.

Dr Nuts expressed his heartfelt condolences to Father and Mother Prickle and, together with his horrified assistants, left the house totally bewildered.

The local liquor store and bakery of the neighbouring village, however, were experiencing golden times. No wonder, then, that both parents were all too relieved on the day their daughters turned two-and-a-half.

That morning, Mother Prickle, happily whistling, took her three angels to school, then ran back home and threw her now one hundred- and fifty-four-kilo-gram body onto the remains of the wilted, vintage, floral sofa.

Seven seconds later, she was sleeping like a Hulk-sized baby.

Father Prickle, to appropriately celebrate this joyous day, had in the meantime gone out and exchanged the expensive watch he had gotten for his confirmation for a bottle of cheap champagne. He downed it in less than ten minutes. Deliciously enjoying the sudden, long-awaited silence, he nestled into the pillow-soft arms of his snoring wife

3. A Staggering Record in School History

To everyone's surprise, first year kindergarten teacher Miss Hilda managed to get the sisters to unlearn their annoying biting habit. It did take the woman a lot of blood and tears – and even more patience and band-aids. Her method was quite simple. While the other toddlers played with the dolls and wooden building blocks, she sat the sisters on her lap and cuddled them. Meanwhile, she let the trio suck on the leather gloves with which she had handled the three Prickle punks on the first day.

The brave teacher was less successful, however, in her efforts to protect the other pupils from the bullying of the torturous trio. Indeed, the sisters took diabolical pleasure in hurting their classmates in all sorts of ways.

No one was spared their sadistic games. And if that wasn't enough already, they also attacked the children of the other classes during breaks. They loved dragging little boys into the bathroom. There, Lucy and Cindy would shove the poor victims head-first into the toilet while Fergy kept flushing. Once, a burly boy from the third year of kindergarten made the mistake of resisting and gave Lucy a nasty wallop. In the unfair fight that followed, the reckless little bugger lost seven milk teeth and a piece of his ear lobe. After that, no one dared to go near the sisters again.

Thus, the three girls always had the entire playground, including sandbox, swings, grassy area, and

toys, to themselves. Much to the annoyance of the kindergarten teachers. Punishment, however, had no effect on the sisters. On the contrary, it made them even more aggressive. At their first time-out during playtime, they flooded the whole school, trimmed all the sansevierias to one centimetre, emptied seventeen tubes of instant glue on the windows, and pinned Cleo, the goldfish, to the big birthday calendar with a thumbtack through her tail. On April 1st. April Fools' Day.

When Miss Hilda came splashing into the classroom, they had just finished shaving Jeanie, the class guinea pig, bald.

The poor kindergarten teacher's hair instantly turned grey, after which she suffered a nervous breakdown and got prescribed three months of rest.

The Prickle sisters were expelled from school at barely two years, six months, and four days old. A staggering record in school history. But the sisters didn't mind at all. They no longer wanted to go to school anyway. In their opinion, it was quite boring there.

So, they stayed at home for the next few years. Much to the delight of the local liquor store and bakery from the neighbouring village, who saw their sales rise substantially.

4. Joel

Mother Prickle was getting fatter by the minute.

‘Because of the stimulants,’ the doctor guessed at first. Obviously in combination with the two dozen cakes she shoved down her throat every day.

But further investigation revealed another cause. Mother Prickle was expecting again.

Father Prickle first choked on his beer and then stared vacantly into the thin air with teary eyes for over an hour.

‘Nice!’ The sisters beamed. ‘Three little brothers to romp around with!’

Father Prickle’s eyes rolled back. He once again toppled backwards and banged the back of his head against a beer crate.

‘What?! Just one?!’ Lucy exclaimed disappointedly when the nurse showed the sisters their newborn baby brother in the nursery a few months later.

‘And such a tiny bugger too,’ Cindy sneered.

‘Do the three of us really have to share that?’ Fergy wondered aloud.

‘Look at his hair,’ Lucy pointed out in disgust.

‘Yuck! Blond curls.’ Cindy gagged.

‘And it’s got blue eyes!’ Fergy added, abhorred. ‘It looks like a little angel!’

‘Isn’t he cute?’ the nurse asked. ‘A real Christmas miracle! It will surely be a most perfect baby.’

The sisters were about to throw the sickly-sweet nurse out the window, when the waiting room door

opened silently. A stout, old lady with a blushing, apple-round face appeared in the doorway. She wore a wide hooded cloak that had butterflies and strange motifs embroidered on it. Her large, green hat was covered in melting snowflakes, which glittered like stars under the room's bright lights. A pungent smell of lavender, incense, and mouldy goat cheese drove away the sterile hospital smell.

The nurse hadn't heard the door open.

'And what will your cute, little brother be called?' she asked.

'Joel.'

The nurse turned around, startled.

The littlest Prickle nearly flew out of her arms.

'Joel,' the plump woman repeated.

She placed her hand gently on the blond curls and made circular movements with her thumb above the little head, where the fontanelle had not yet fully closed. She looked deep into the little boy's water-blue eyes.

'Joel,' the warm voice spoke for the third time.

Then a satisfied smile appeared on the old woman's face. She put her leather shoulder bag on the ground and held out her hands to the baby.

'Can I hold him for a moment, Miss?' she asked.

The nurse hesitated.

'You needn't be afraid,' the strange woman reassured her.

'My name is Grausmans, Diana Grausmans. I'm his grandmother.'