

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract fractal pattern. It features thick, flowing, ribbon-like structures in shades of lime green and yellow-green, which curve and swirl across the frame. Interspersed within these green forms are intricate, smaller-scale fractal patterns in shades of purple and blue, creating a sense of depth and complexity. The overall effect is a vibrant, almost ethereal, and somewhat chaotic visual field.

# **BLACK ANGELS**

**Bruce Jay Friedman**

*Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction*

# **Black Angels**

**Bruce Jay Friedman**

## e-Book 2015 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction* by Jesse D. Geller, Ph.D. and Paul D. Spector, M.A.

Copyright © 1987 Jesse D. Geller, Ph.D. and Paul D. Spector, M.A.

“Black Angels” by Bruce Jay Friedman. From BLACK ANGELS (Simon St Schuster, 1966). Reprinted by permission of Candida Donadio St Associates, Inc. Copyright © 1966 by Bruce Jay Friedman.

All Rights Reserved

Created in the United States of America

[www.freepsychotherapybooks.org](http://www.freepsychotherapybooks.org)  
[ebooks@theipi.org](mailto:ebooks@theipi.org)

# Introduction

**“Black Angels”** by Bruce Jay Friedman

The profession of psychotherapy originated within the entrepreneurial context of the private practice of medicine, and, like all other professionals, psychotherapists charge fees. Psychotherapists can be paid directly by their clients, reimbursed by insurance companies, or salaried by institutions. No matter how payment is handled, there is some tension between the practical concerns of commerce and those of humanitarianism in the practice of psychotherapy. Some critics view psychotherapy as a form of purchasing friendship. Questions concerning the price tag of caring and listening inevitably arise during the course of therapy. “Black Angels” is a fantasy about the business aspects of therapy.

# Black Angels

*Bruce Jay Friedman*

Smothered by debt, his wife and child in flight, Stefano held fast to his old house in the country, a life buoy in a sea of despair. Let him but keep up the house, return to it each day; before long, his wife would come to her senses, fly back to him. Yet he dreaded the approach of spring, which meant large teams of gardeners who would charge him killing prices to keep the place in shape. Cheapest of all had been the Angeluzzi Brothers, who had gotten him off the ground with a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar cleanup, then followed through with ninety dollars a month for maintenance, April through October, a hundred extra for the leaf-raking fall windup. Meticulous in April, the four Angeluzzis soon began to dog it; for his ninety, Stefano got only a few brisk lawn cuts and a swipe or two at his flower beds. This spring, unable to work, his life in shreds. Stefano held off on the grounds as long as he could. The grass grew to his shins until one day Swansdowne, a next-door neighbor who had won marigold contests, called on another subject, but with much lawn-mowing and fertilizing in his voice. Stefano dialed the Angeluzzis; then, on an impulse, he dropped the phone and reached for the local paper, running his finger along Home Services. A gardener named Please Try Us caught his fancy. He called the number, asked the deep voice at the other end to come by soon

and give him an estimate. The following night, a return call came through.

“I have seen and checked out the place,” said the voice, the tones heavy, resonant, solid.

“What’ll you take for a cleanup?” asked Stefano. “We’ll start there.”

Long pause. Lip smack. Then, “Thutty dollars.”

“Which address did you go to? I’m at forty-two Spring. Big old place on the corner of Spring and Rooter.”

“That’s correct. For fertilizing, that’ll be eight extra, making thutty-eight.”

“Awful lot of work here,” said Stefano, confused, tingling with both guilt and relief. “All right, when can you get at it?”

“Tomorrow morning. Eight o’clock.”

“You’re on.”

Stefano watched them arrive the next day, Sunday, a quartet of massive Negroes in two trucks and two sleek private cars. In stifling heat, they worked in checkered shirts and heavy pants, two with fedoras impossibly balanced on the backs of their great shaved heads. Stefano, a free-lance writer of technical manuals, went back to his work, stopping now and then to check the Negroes through the window. How could they possibly make out on thirty-eight

dollars, he wondered. Divided four ways it came to nothing. Gas alone for their fleet of cars would kill their nine-fifty each. He'd give them forty-five dollars to salve his conscience, but still, what about their groceries, rent? Late in the afternoon, he ran out with beers for each. "Plenty of leaves, eh?" he said to Cotten, largest of them, the leader, expressionless in dainty steel-rimmed glasses.

"Take about two and a half days," said the Negro.

"I'm giving you forty-five dollars," said Stefano. "What the hell." The job actually took three full days, two for the cleanup, a third for the lawn and fertilizing the beds. The last day was a bad one for Stefano. Through his window, he watched the black giants trim the lawn, then kneel in winter clothes and lovingly collect what seemed to be each blade of grass so there'd be no mess. He wanted to run out and tell them to do less work; certainly not at those prices. Yet he loved the prices, too. He could take it all out of expense money, not even bother his regular free-lance payments. At the end of the day, he walked up to Cotten, took out his wallet and said, "I'm giving you cash. So you won't have to fool with a check." It had occurred to him that perhaps the Negroes only did cleanups, no maintenance. By doing enough of them, thousands, perhaps they could sneak by, somehow make a living. "What about maintenance?" he asked the head gardener.

The man scratched his ear, shook his head, finally said, "Can't do your

place for less than eighteen dollars a month.”

“You guys do some work,” said Stefano, shivering with glee. “Best I’ve seen. I think you’re too low. I’ll give you twenty-two.”

The Negroes came back twice a week, turned Stefano’s home into a showplace, hacking down dead trees, planting new ones, filling in dead spots, keeping the earth black and loamy. Swansdowne, who usually let Stefano test-run new gardeners and then swooped down to sign them up if they were good, looked on with envy, yet called one day and said, “I would never let a colored guy touch my place.”

“They’re doing a great job on mine,” said Stefano.

Maybe that explains it, he thought. All of the Swansdownes who won’t have Negro gardeners. That’s why their rates are low. Otherwise they’d starve. He felt good, a liberal. Why shouldn’t he get a slight break on money?

At the end of May, Stefano paid them their twenty-two dollars and distributed four American-cheese sandwiches. The three assistants took them back to a truck where one had mayonnaise. “You guys do other kinds of work?” Stefano asked Cotten, who leaned on a hoe. “What about painting? A house?”

The gardener looked up at Stefano’s colonial. “We do,” he said. “How much would you take?” The best estimate on the massive ten-roomer had



been seven hundred dollars.

“Fifty-eight dollars,” said the huge Negro, neutral in his steel-rims.

“I’ll pay for half the paint,” said Stefano.

The following day, when Stefano awakened, the four Negroes, on high, buckling ladders, had half the house done, the paint deep brown, rich and gurgling in the sun. Their gardening clothes were wildly spattered. He’d pick up the cleaning bill, thought Stefano. It was only fair.

“It looks great!” he hollered up to Cotten, swaying massively in the wind.

“She’ll shape up time we get the fourth coat on.”

By mid-June, the four Negroes had cleaned out Stefano’s attic for three dollars, waterproofed his basement for another sixteen; an elaborate network of drainage pipes went in for twelve-fifty. One day he came home to find the floors mopped, sanded, shellacked, his cabinets scrubbed, linen closets dizzying in their cleanliness. Irritated for the first time—I didn’t order this—he melted quickly when he saw the bill. A slip on the bread box read: “You owes us \$2.80.” Loving the breaks he was getting, Stefano threw them bonuses, plenty of sandwiches, all his old sports jackets, Venetian blinds that had come out of the attic and books of fairly recent vintage on Nova Scotia tourism. Never in the thick of marriage had his place been so immaculate; cars slowed down to admire his dramatically painted home, his shrubs

bursting with fertility. Enter any room; its cleanliness would tear your head off. With all these ridiculously cheap home services going for him, Stefano felt at times his luck had turned. Still, a cloak of loneliness rode his shoulders, aggravation clogged his throat. If only to hate her, he missed his wife, a young, pretty woman, circling the globe with her lover, an assistant director on daytime TV. He saw pictures of her, tumbling with lust, in staterooms, inns, the backs of small foreign cars. He missed his son, too, a boy of ten, needing braces. God only knows what shockers he was being exposed to. The pair had fled in haste, leaving behind mementos, toys lined up on shelves, dresses spilling out of chests. Aging quickly, his confidence riddled, Stefano failed in his quest for dates with young girls, speechless and uncertain on the phone. What could he do with himself. At these prices, he could keep his home spotless. But would that make everything all right. Would that haul back a disgruntled wife and son. One night, his heart weighing a ton, he returned from an "Over 28" dance to find the burly Negroes winding up their work. Sweating long into the night, they had rigged up an elaborate network of gas lamps, the better to show off a brilliantly laid out thicket of tea roses and dwarf fruit trees. Total cost of the lighting: five dollars and fifty cents.

"Really lovely," said Stefano, inspecting his grounds, counting out some bills. "Here," he said to the head gardener, "take another deuce. In my condition, money means nothing." The huge Negro towed down his forehead, gathered up his equipment. "Hey," said Stefano. "Come on in for a

beer. If I don't talk to someone I'll bust."

"Got to get on," said Cotten. "We got work to do."

"Come on, come on," said Stefano. "What can you do at this hour. Give a guy a break."

The Negro shook his head in doubt, then moved massively toward the house, Stefano clapping him on the back in a show of brotherhood.

Inside, Stefano went for flip-top beers. The gardener sat down in the living room, his great bulk caving deeply into the sofa. For a moment, Stefano worried about gardening clothes, Negro ones to boot, in contact with living-room furniture, then figured the hell with it, who'd complain.

"I've got the worst kind of trouble," said Stefano, leaning back on a Danish modern slat bench. "Sometimes I don't think I'm going to make it through the night. My wife's checked out on me. You probably figured that out already."

The Negro crossed his great legs, sipped his beer. The steel-rimmed glasses had a shimmer to them and Stefano could not make out his eyes.

"She took the kid with her," said Stefano. "That may be the worst part. You don't know what it's like to have a kid tearing around your house for ten years and then not to hear anything. Or maybe you do?" Stefano asked hopefully. "You probably have a lot of trouble of your own."

Silent, the Negro sat forward and shoved a cloth inside his flannel shirt to mop his chest.

“Anyway, I’ll be goddamned if I know what to do. Wait around? Pretend she’s never coming back? I don’t know what in the hell to do with myself. Where do I go from here?”

“How long she gone?” asked the guest, working on the back of his neck now.

“What’s that got to do with it?” asked Stefano. “About four months, I guess. Just before you guys came. Oh, I see what you mean. If she hasn’t come back in four months, she’s probably gone for good. I might as well start building a new life. That’s a good point.”

The Negro put away the cloth and folded his legs again, crossing his heavy, blunted fingers, arranging them on the point of one knee.

“It just happened out of the clear blue sky,” said Stefano. “Oh, why kid around. It was never any good.” He told the Negro about their courtship, the false pregnancy, how he had been “forced” to get married. Then he really started in on his wife, the constant primping, the thousands of ways she had made him jealous, the in-laws to support. He let it all come out of him, like air from a tire, talking with heat and fury; until he realized he had been talking nonstop for maybe twenty minutes, half an hour. The Negro listened to him patiently, not bothering with his beer. Finally, when Stefano sank back to

catch his breath, the gardener asked a question: “You think you any good?”

“What do you mean,” said Stefano. “Of course I do. Oh, I get what you’re driving at. If I thought I was worth anything, I wouldn’t let all of this kill me. I’d just kind of brace myself, dig out and really build something fine for myself. Funny how you make just the right remark. It’s really amazing. You know I’ve done the analysis bit. Never meant a damned thing to me. I’ve had nice analysts, tough ones, all kinds. But the way you just let me sound off and then asked that one thing. This is going to sound crazy, but what if we just talked this way, couple of times a week. I just sound off and then you come in with the haymaker, the way you just did. Just for fun, what would you charge me? An hour?”

“Fo’ hunnid,” said the Negro.

“Four hundred. That’s really a laugh. You must be out of your head. What are you, crazy? Don’t you know I was just kidding around?”

The Negro took a sip of the beer and rose to leave. “All right, wait a second,” said Stefano. “Hold on a minute. Let’s just finish up this hour, all right. Then we’ll see about other times. This one doesn’t count, does it?”

“It do,” said the Negro, sinking into the couch and snapping out a pad and pencil.

“That’s not really fair, you know,” said Stefano. “To count this one.

Anyway, we'll see. Maybe we'll try it for a while. That's some price. Where was I? Whew, all that money. To get back to what I was saying, this girl has been a bitch ever since the day I laid eyes on her. You made me see it tonight. In many ways, I think she's a lot like my mom. . ."