

Bruce Jay Friedman



**MR. PRINZO'S  
BREAKTHROUGH**

*Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction*

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# Introduction

## **“Mr. Prinzo’s Breakthrough”** by Bruce Jay Friedman

Facing the limitations of what psychotherapy can actually accomplish, and determining realistic criteria to assess a patient’s readiness to terminate, pose problems for therapists and patients alike. The relief of “symptoms” is probably the most widely accepted criterion of readiness for termination. The wild parody “Mr. Prinzo’s Breakthrough,” by Bruce Jay Friedman, dramatizes a patient’s pervasive distrust and frantic testing of the ground rules and boundaries of the therapeutic relationship. In his seventh year of treatment, Mr. Prinzo longs for his dramatic therapeutic “breakthrough” and pushes the issue of basic trust to an absurd and darkly humorous conclusion.

# Mr. Prinzo's Breakthrough

*Bruce Jay Friedman*

Although Mr. Prinzo, a small, hairless man of forty-one, was a highly respected technical director in television and, for a bachelor, earned a fine salary, he was forced to dwell in a tiny, however nicely decorated, apartment on New York's west side, his only luxury being top cuts of meat for his airedale. The apartment was not exactly a cold water flat (hot water did gush through unexpectedly now and then) but, in truth, the best Mr. Prinzo could count on for his midnight showers was tepid. In any case, Mr. Prinzo blamed psychoanalysis for his condition. He had been seeing Dr. Tobes four times a week now for seven years, at a cost to him of \$120 a week, and there was no end in sight. The two friends with whom Mr. Prinzo started in analysis both had had their breakthroughs. One, whose problem had been lack of confidence, now was able to shout epithets at bullies, and the second, once unable to relate to intelligent women, was started on an affair with a lady amino acids specialist who looked like an attractive Golda Meir. Mr. Prinzo, whose basic difficulty was cringing, could hold himself in check now and then, but still felt most comfortable when in a good cringe, and would have been the first to admit he was far from cured. On the anniversary of his seventh year of psychoanalysis, Mr. Prinzo walked through the many doors leading to

Dr. Tobes' office and took a seat on the window sill. (There were no couches in the office of Dr. Tobes, who was known for his informality. Sometimes Mr. Prinzo would sprawl out on the floor during sessions and, on other occasions, just lean against walls. Pacing was allowed, too, and once or twice, on muggy days, he and Dr. Tobes had gone out on the fire escape.)

"Friends all about me are having their breakthroughs," said Mr. Prinzo, "and I don't mind telling you I'd like to have mine. It's high time."

Dr. Tobes was perched owlshly across from Mr. Prinzo, informally chewing up a pencil. It was not only that Dr. Tobes cultivated owlsh expressions. He was the dead, spitting image of an owl, a tall owl if such a thing were possible, and he would have passed muster at the most authentic of museum owl exhibitions.

"Can you think of anything that might be blocking the treatment?" asked Dr. Tobes.

"Well, something must be or I wouldn't be cringing about after seven years."

"How is your cringe, incidentally?" asked Dr. Tobes.

"A little better. Oh, why lie, I still fall right into one the minute I roll out of bed and cringe my way right through the day. Look, let's face it, there are still things I can't tell you in here. Oh, I know I've gone into my dandruff fears

and there isn't much more I can learn about those dreams in which I'm a stray paramecium. But I'm holding plenty back. I'll give you an example. Where are your diplomas? You think I like coming in here and not seeing a single one? If you ask me, that's being too informal. But that's the kind of thing I hold back. It's been bothering me for seven years. Another is your taste in furniture. You just don't go mixing Dutch Colonial and Chinese Chippendale unless you know exactly what you're doing. And why haven't you once, just once, called me by my first name instead of Mr. Prinzo? Oh, I know it's because I'm supposed to be an adult at all times, but you'd think that in seven years you'd slip just one 'Philsy' in there. And there are others, too. I might as well get it right out now that I'm a toenail muncher. It *is* a relief just to say these things. In any case, when I get back from the studio I can hardly wait to get my Argyles off before I start right in." "Any particular foot?" asked Dr. Tobes, writing in a pad.

"I knew I'd get you writing on that one," said Mr. Prinzo. "Both, I seem to do my lefts before my rights, though."

"Why do you feel you can't tell me something like that?" said Dr. Tobes, picking up a badminton racket and studying it owlshly.

"Sometimes I wish you weren't so informal," said Mr. Prinzo. "Maybe if there'd been a couch in here I'd have been out in three instead of beginning my seventh year. *Why* can't I tell you something like that? Because I'm afraid you'll tell, that's why. Oh, I know you won't go blurting it around town, but

how do I know there aren't *some* things you won't leak out? I just don't feel I can come in here and tell you anything in the world and not have you make an immediate phone call as soon as I'm out the door."

"Who do you think I'll call?" asked Dr. Tobes.

"I don't like the way you'll casually slip a question in there as though it's unimportant, when we both know it's full of dynamite. *Who* will you call? I don't know. Authorities. Hospitals . . . the police

"Well, you *are* right about one thing," said Dr. Tobes. "I should have gone into the nature of our compact a long time ago. It was silly of me."

"Silly?" said Mr. Prinzo. "I might have been out of here five years ago. It may have cost me thirty thousand. I'm sorry I said that, I wanted to think it, but she just slipped out."

"That's all right," said Dr. Tobes, with much sweetness. "You may be right. In any case, of *course* we break the compact under certain circumstances. There are a few. For example, if you told me you were going to commit suicide tonight I might call the police and tell them." "What are the others?" asked Mr. Prinzo. "This is fun to talk about, even though it's very serious. What if I told you I'd committed a murder? You see, that's the kind of thing I could never tell you, and yet if I've got to hold back one thing, I've got to hold back tons. What I need is to be able to tell you everything, without fear, otherwise I'll be in here forty-two more years."



“How damned silly of me not to go into this,” said Dr. Tobes, slightly abashed, but owlish nonetheless, sort of like an abashed owl. “Mr. Prinzo, you may rest assured that the compact we have is pure and sacred. Dr. Berndo and his boys up at Columbia call it the most inviolable compact known to the civilized world, and I tend to go along. If you confessed a murder to me, I might *urge* you to give yourself up if I felt that was best for you. But I’d certainly never inform the police on my own accord.”

“Seventeen?” asked Mr. Prinzo.

“I wouldn’t care if you were seventeen or forty-one when you did it.”

“I don’t mean that,” said Mr. Prinzo. “What if I’d committed seventeen murders and gotten away with them all?”

“The thing there,” said Dr. Tobes, “is whether I thought you were going to try for another. One that might endanger *your* life. I might call the law then. That’s the key to it, don’t you see. *Your* life. *Your* welfare. Whatever’s best for you, *my* patient. That’s the rule Berndo and all of us go right down the line with.”

“If I could only believe that. Oh, the things I might come out with! If I could only believe you wouldn’t tell.”

By the end of the hour, Mr. Prinzo had gone back over an early apple fight with his older sister (one in which he’d aimed McIntosh cores at her

capacious bosoms), and had then cautiously broken new ground by telling Dr. Tobes that on seven separate occasions he'd falsely upped his studio petty cash vouchers and furthermore, felt compelled to do it again. "Now that certainly isn't the kind of thing you'll report. I know that," said Mr. Prinzo, with only the faintest hint of doubt in his voice. To which Dr. Tobes smiled owlishly as if to say, "Well, really now."

"If I could only be sure," said Mr. Prinzo, taking his leave of the doctor.

Hours later, after a long nap at home, Mr. Prinzo cringed out of his apartment building and took a cab to Riverdale in the Bronx.

"I grew up in the same neighborhood as Vincent 'Mad Dog' Coll," said the cab driver, "and might have ended up the same way had I not mended my ways early in the game."

"I don't want to do any talking on this ride," said Mr. Prinzo. "I just want to get there and do something."

In Riverdale, Mr. Prinzo got out of the cab in a neighborhood that screamed of luxury and had little difficulty finding the ground floor duplex apartment he was looking for. He knocked on the door and when a woman's voice asked who it was, said, "I've got magazines. No I haven't. Look, will you let me in? I've got something crazy to say." A pretty, busy-looking brunette woman with glasses opened the door. She wore a flowered formal print dress of the type favored by women who serve on committees. It made her seem

ten years older than she was and fought to conceal all evidence of the sturdy bosoms that lurked beneath her bodice.

“I don’t know you,” the woman said, “and I’ve got invitation lists to get out.”

Mr. Prinzo cringed past her into the apartment, sinking deep into the carpeting, and said, “I don’t know how long I want to be here. It’s a crazy thing. Look, here’s why I’m here. When you moved in, the apartment was already two years old. You didn’t know the first tenant, but it was my mom and she died here. It’s crazy, but I just wanted to be in here for a little while and just walk around the place where my mom spent her last years. I may do some crying.”

The woman blinked her eyes beneath the hornrims, not quite sure what to make of what she had heard, and then said, “It is crazy, but it may be the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard in my whole life.” With that, she took Mr. Prinzo’s head to her bosom and he made uncontrollable snuffling sounds in there. “How many sons do that for their moms?” she said, stroking his head, her voice catching a bit. “I’ve got a committee at seven,” the woman said. “Our theme for the evening is ‘Should We Be Tolerant Toward Intolerance, Too?’ but you just stay right here and bury yourself in the atmosphere as much as you like while I’m getting ready. Then maybe you can come back some other time.” She left Mr. Prinzo for about ten minutes, and when she came out with

her coat on he was standing in the kitchen looking at the sink. “Mom did her dishes there,” said Mr. Prinzo.

“I wish I’d known,” said the woman. “I’d never have had it redone in mosaic tile. Look, can I drop you downtown? Then maybe you can come back some other time for a longer session.”

“I don’t think I’ll want to come back,” said Mr. Prinzo, snuffling and going to her bosom again. “Not after that sink.”

Outside, in the blackness, the woman led Mr. Prinzo to a stationwagon and they drove silently for a while. “If more sons would do that for their moms,” said the woman, “we’d have less juvenile crime, more understanding, and a better America.”

“That’s a lot of committee crap,” said Mr. Prinzo suddenly. Then he shouted, “I wanted you to be full-blooded, rich and gurgling with life, a liberated woman given to hurling herself into frenzied modern dances. Then I might not have gone ahead. Pull over to that deserted Carvel ice cream stand.”

The woman obeyed and as she stopped the car in the deserted lot, asked, “Did your mother work here, too?”

“There was no mom,” said Mr. Prinzo, whipping out a small implement used for lifting the lids off junior baby dessert jars. “Goddammit, I meant to bring steak knives,” he said. “This isn’t going to be any good.” With a shrug, he

turned out the car lights and, lifting the baby jar opener, fell upon the horrified woman whose last words were: "It's 6:45. I've only got fifteen minutes to make committee."

A little later, Mr. Prinzo lifted her lifeless form behind the counter of the deserted Carvel stand and propped her up against an old sundae machine. He stood erect, flexed his arms and said, "Violence inhabits the meek, too." Then he drove the stationwagon back to the duplex and took a cab to his apartment.

The following day, at his regular session with Dr. Tobes, Mr. Prinzo took his place on the window sill and said, "I was going to go into some fresh new traumas I've come up with, but why do it when I've only got one thing on my mind. I've done one."

"One what?" asked Dr. Tobes.

"I've committed one. A murder. Only you're not going to like the one I did. It was the only way I could really test the compact. If you don't tell about this one then I know I can tell you anything. I got your wife."

Dr. Tobes said, "What do you mean you got her? Do you know my wife?"

"I got her. I sort of murdered her. Why am I saying 'sort of? I really did. I was going to anyway, but then when I saw what she was, I *really* was going to, and I did. What the hell kind of woman was that for you to be married to?"

Dr. Tobes picked up the phone and dialed a number. “Hello, Suze, this is Gar. Did Jean stay over at your place last night, after Intolerance? She didn’t *come* to Intolerance? Thanks.”

Dr. Tobes put down the phone and said, “Jesus, what did you have to do that for? I’m going to turn around here for a minute.” He spun his chair around and put his head in his hands and for several minutes his shoulders trembled and shook. Then he turned back and said, “All right now, look, you’ve got to go to the police. That’s the first thing.”

“I knew it,” said Mr. Prinzo. “I mean didn’t I just know it. Didn’t I know that was the first thing you were going to say. Why should I have been in any doubt? You talked about the sacredness of our compact, sure, but then when the chips are down for one second . . .”

“It’s for your own good,” said Dr. Tobes. “Here, I’ll ring them right up for you.”

“Crapola,” said Mr. Prinzo. “Look, I committed that murder for only one reason—to see just how confidential all of this is. I’m not committing any more. And it isn’t going to do me any good to go to jail for seventy years. I have a lot of life and good times ahead of me. The only reason you want me to turn myself in is because it was *your* wife. If it was anybody else’s, name anyone, and you wouldn’t be reaching for the phone.”

“You may be right,” said Dr. Tobes. “All right, you’ve got your whole

hour left. Do you want to do some dreams? How do you feel?" "I'll feel a hell of a lot better when you help me get rid of the body." "I'm not getting rid of any bodies," said Dr. Tobes. "That's not in it."

"It is so and you know it," said Mr. Prinzo. "Anything that'll make me feel better. You said that's the key to it all. It'll make me feel better to get her someplace where she won't be found."

"I've never been in anything like this," said Dr. Tobes. "Jesus, my wife is gone. Hang on a second, I've got to do a little more crying. I'll turn around."

Outside, in the car. Dr. Tobes drove with fury, his eyes a blur of tears. "It isn't doing me any good to see you crying," said Mr. Prinzo beside him. "I don't want to see any doctor doing that."

"All right, I'll try to blot them down," said Dr. Tobes. "But Jesus!"

"And take it easy on the driving. That certainly isn't making me feel better."

Dr. Tobes eased up on the accelerator and Mr. Prinzo said, "Each time I had a date, Sis and Mom would crowd me into a corner and make me feel ashamed. Sis once hid the cards under the piano and I found them accidentally, just fumbling around under there. As my hand accidentally touched the card box, I got a definite sexual thrill."

"This is not a session," said Dr. Tobes. "Jesus, you just got my wife. We're

not in any session now.”

“I didn’t get a full hour in your office,” said Mr. Prinzo, “and I don’t see why I can’t finish ’er up now. You’re getting me upset.”

“All right, all right,” said Dr. Tobes. “Calm down. All right, see if you can pick up the thought again. You’ll have to forgive me.”

“I want you to be perfect,” said Mr. Prinzo. “If you’re not, it gets me all rattled.”

The sun had gone down when they arrived at the Carvel ice cream stand. “I wonder why I picked an ice cream stand?” asked Mr. Prinzo. “Do you think that’s worth analyzing?”

“I can’t concentrate on any of that,” said Dr. Tobes. “I’m going to see my wife. There’ll be quite a bit of crying.”

“Do try to be strong,” said Mr. Prinzo. “If you get flustered, I’ll be upset, and you’re not allowed to let me be that way.”

“I’ll try and hold back,” said Dr. Tobes, “but you’re not getting any guarantee.”

They put the body in a duffel bag Dr. Tobes kept in his trunk and started back to the car with it. “When I met her she was a *Redbook* reader and do you know that recently I was unable to get my *Virginia Quarterly* away from her? Oh, Jesus, Mr. Prinzo, what have you done?”



"I can't stand it when you're stern with me," said Mr. Prinzo. "Do you realize how hard it'll be for me to tell you things now? YOU MUSTN'T BE STERN."

"I didn't mean to. All right, try to relax."

The pair hefted the duffel into the back seat of Dr. Tobes' sedan. "I don't have anything complicated that we're to do now," said Mr. Prinzo. "I just know a very high place near the beach where we can drop 'er down and I'm sure nobody ever goes there, at least on the bottom part. I'm going to go away and this will at least give me time." The place was on the North Shore of Long Island where Mr. Prinzo had monied relatives. They drove there through the night and Mr. Prinzo said, "You look so different out of doors. How come you don't wear a toupee?"

"Now who is it you *really* want to wear a toupee?"

"Me," said Mr. Prinzo. "Amazing how you get me every time. You're such an amazing possessor of wisdom. That's why I couldn't see you married to, what's her name, I guess we can call her Duffel Bag Dolores now, eh? That was in bad taste. Look, I hope you'll always let me know when I step out of line, when I offend you in any way."

"I'll let you know all right," said Dr. Tobes.

"Now you're putting me on my guard. You mustn't be stern with me."

They came to a high, barren, cool place where the noise of the surf suddenly beat against the car windows. Mr. Prinzo had Dr. Tobes pull over onto the sand and then, carrying their duffel bag, they climbed a formation of wet rocks until the beach was far below; except for some lights across Long Island Sound, they were completely enveloped by blackness. "I'm not crying," said Dr. Tobes, "but let me give her a last little squeeze." Mr. Prinzo giggled and Dr. Tobes said, "There's not a damned thing wrong in that."

When they had tossed the duffel off into the blackness, Mr. Prinzo said, "I'd like to go down below and get my feet wet, as long as we're out here. One thing that has come through in these last seven years is that I'm to just sally forth and grab my pleasures where I may." Dr. Tobes followed him wordlessly, and below in the sand they removed their shoes and socks. A woman drifted by in a bikini, pensively kicking up sand with her toes, and Mr. Prinzo said, "It's Laurie Prinzo, my sister-in-law."

"I often come here late and wander through the surf," the woman said. "I saw it done in a James Mason movie. Your brother is what makes me so crazy. He really is a big spender. Try to get him to spend a nickel on something that *he* didn't dream up. Oh, he's got it all right. But try to get him to spend a nickel of it. He's really the last of the big spenders."

"This is Gar Tobes," said Mr. Prinzo. "We're just out here doing something. How come you didn't ask me what?"

"I always feel you get to know somebody better when you meet them out in the surf. You see a side of them you never saw before. I've got to get back. I don't know. I may suddenly develop a craving for the Late Show."

She walked off and Mr. Prinzo said, "I hope you weren't offended by my calling you Gar, Dr. Tobes. I felt sort of giddy doing it, the first time in seven years. It was like sex. What did you think of Laurie?"

"She's lovely. I don't say there's anything wrong in my looking at other women now. It's just that emotionally I'm unable to. It's unrealistic of me, but I can't help it. Oh, Jesus, it's starting to hit me now. I'm going to do a little more crying now. I'll try to wrap it up as quickly as I can. And of *course* I realize it isn't good for you to see me doing that. I'm upset, all right, though, I may go back into analysis for a few sessions, myself, now."

In the car, Mr. Prinzo said, "I'm staying at your place tonight."

"I want to be alone and get things straightened out," said Dr. Tobes.

"Now you *are* upsetting me. You probably don't even like me, really. Could you psychoanalyze me if you didn't like me?"

"Yes, I could," said Dr. Tobes. "I'm not saying I dislike you, only that I could treat you if I did."

"How about Joe McCarthy? Wait a minute. Even I can see through that question. I'm trying to find out your political views. Don't even answer. I've

got to stay over with you, though. So far, all of this has been okay, but I don't know what's going to happen. What if I get one of my crazy dreams, one in which I'm in a terrible jail feeling so guilty I could just die. Nosiree, I want you right there."

"I'm not sure that any of this is analytically sound," said Dr. Tobes, heading the car in the direction of his duplex.

Dr. Tobes sat grave and ashen-faced, all through the night, in a French Provincial parlor chair, while Mr. Prinzo slept in the guest room. In the morning, Mr. Prinzo got up and said, "I feel sort of shortchanged. No dream at all. I expected a beaut tonight, after all those things yesterday, and I thought it would have been great having you here so I could dash right in with all the details. I don't like to see you looking tired. Why the hell didn't you go to sleep? Look, there's a boat sailing for Barbados at five this afternoon and I want to be on it, everything arranged. It takes about three days usually to make arrangements, but I want you to hit them over the head with your doctor credentials and get me on there."

"Look, Mr. Prinzo," said Dr. Tobes. "Surely you must realize there are limits to all this. I don't want to do this for you. Surely you must realize I'm a human being with natural feelings of remorse and revenge. I don't *want* to do these things for you."

"There are no limits. You know damned well there aren't. I'm your

patient and the only thing in the world that counts is how I feel. You've got to stick to that because if you don't you'll never be able to hold your head up and practice another hour of psychoanalysis. Here's this week's \$120 in cash."

"I'm shaky after no sleep," said Dr. Tobes, sipping some coffee and pocketing the money.

"Well, don't be shaky," said Mr. Prinzo. "That isn't going to do me any good."

Mr. Prinzo lounged about the apartment in his pajamas all morning, and when the doctor got back, he said, "I don't like your books. You've got plenty but many of them are just fillers. What are you doing with *Favorite Canada Campsites*? That's the kind of book you shouldn't have in there."

"Why do you feel threatened when you see books you don't approve of? Did you ever ask yourself that? We're not in session now. I got your tickets all right. A patient of mine is a travel agent. They're for five this afternoon, but you'll have to be inoculated in Barbados if you want to come back here. Good-by. I don't feel well at all. It's beginning to sink in about my wife, and I don't care if it's emotional or what, it's a very real feeling of loss that I feel."

"Don't good-by me," said Mr. Prinzo. "You're coming right down to the boat with me. How do you think I would feel if I went off friendless and alone with no one saying good-by? My last impressions of the States would be a place where I was without buddies and people didn't come to say good-by."

That wouldn't do me a helluva lot of good. Oh, no, you don't. You're coming right down with me."

"I want to sit in a chair now," said Dr. Tobes. "I want to cry. I need a good catharsis and then I'll be better."

"You're coming with me. You know you have to. And I hate seeing you this way. If you think it's helping my treatment, this whole business of the way you're carrying on, you're crazy."

On a last minute impulse, Mr. Prinzo went out to a local Bermuda shop and bought some clamdigger pants and orange gaucho shirts.

The ride to the boat took roughly three quarters of an hour, and the two men agreed it would constitute a session, Dr. Tobes taking his notes at red lights. As they pulled into the parking lot at the boat dock, Dr. Tobes said, "We have to close the hour now," and Mr. Prinzo said, "You always nip me off right in the middle of critical things."

Mr. Prinzo had borrowed Dr. Tobes' suitcase, and the doctor helped him carry it toward the boat. Stopping at the foot of the gangplank, Mr. Prinzo said, "Now in one of your letters I want you to tell me if there's a good analyst in Barbados."

"One of my letters?" said Dr. Tobes. "You'll get none from me. I'm not writing you any letters."

“Oh, yes, you are,” said Mr. Prinzo angrily. “Three a week, with picture postal cards interspersed. No one but you knows where I’m going and how do you think I’m going to feel getting no letters from home?”

“I’ll send you the letters,” said Dr. Tobes. “I don’t know about the cards.”

Mr. Prinzo went about half way up the gangplank and then said, “Now start waving.”

“I’m not waving,” said Dr. Tobes, his voice cracking. “I’m not waving to you.”

“Wave,” said Mr. Prinzo. “I’ll feel good. I’ve got to be waved off.”

Dr. Tobes slowly lifted his arm, and this time an avalanche of tears broke through and flooded his face. “There,” he said, choking, “I’m a heartbroken man, but I’m waving.”

“Good,” said Mr. Prinzo. “That’s good. I guess we’re going now.” He lifted his head and sucked in the air. “I feel fine,” he said. “Say, have you noticed? I’m standing up straight now. I’m out of my cringe.”

“Yes,” said Dr. Tobes, and suddenly the tears stopped and his eyes brightened. “You *are* out of your cringe.” With that, he whirled around, shouted, “You’re cured! You’ve had your breakthrough,” grabbed the sleeve of a dock patrolman and, as the two of them flew up the gangplank to Mr. Prinzo, shouted again, “And you’re not my patient any more.”