

Inner Monologue

February 2026

Issue 41



This Issue:

Essay: "Getting Love Right"

News & Puzzles

Story Excerpt: *Last Camper at Thoreau*

Random Thought Bubble

Getting Love Right

February includes one of the most hyped holidays, second only to Christmas: Valentine's Day. Talking about love in February? Oh, how cliché!

According to ChatGPT, "Love is one of the most powerful and enduring forces in human life." The divorce rate says otherwise. Clearly, ChatGPT has never been in love. In fact, psychologists will tell you fear is a far more powerful force.

So, why am I dumping on love? I'm not. Love is the most desirable emotion. It brings undeniable joy, but let's be realistic about it. I can love pizza, but the pizza can't love me back. Loving someone brings no guarantee of reciprocity.

The most desirable thing is to be loved. We all want to be loved. Let's be honest: many of us can be fairly unlovable. Love is hard work. It's not just talking about the wooing. Candy, roses and romantic candle-lit dinners are easy, but loving in the long term requires stamina. It requires vulnerability. Love is difficult. Love is not for wimps. But such sentiments don't sell Hallmark cards.

Some things are so difficult that they require a



partner. Love is one of those things. Each partner must carry a heavier load from time to time. Taking turns listening and enduring, love is a team effort. None of this is news to old married couples. Commit to the team, and you'll receive that love.

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News & Events

Upcoming Events

Below are the book events I've committed to so far. Each in-person event includes a range of talented authors.

March 14, 2026

10 am - 4 pm

Books in Bloom

Randolph Community Center

30 Calais Road

Randolph, NJ 07869

**Books
in Bloom**

May 2-3, 2026

Noon - 4 pm

Days of Wine Romance & More

Brook Hollow Winery

594 Route 94

Columbia, New Jersey 07832

www adayofwineromanceandmore.com

*A Day of Wine, Romance,
AND MORE!*

September 19, 2026

9 am - 3 pm

New Providence Book Festival

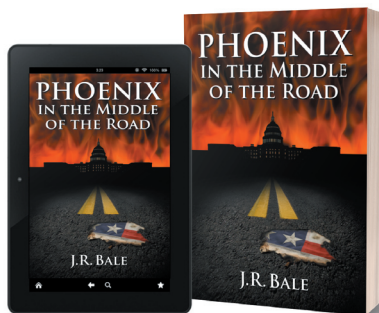
Grounds of the Salt Box Museum

1350 Springfield Avenue

New Providence, NJ 07974

www.NewProvidenceBookFestival.com


New Providence
Book Festival



About J.R. Bale

J.R. Bale has always tried to explore the themes in his stories from an unusual perspective, whether it was politics in *Phoenix in the Middle of the Road* or consciousness in *Cognition Chronicles: The Redstone Legacy*, and *Cognition Chronicles: Destiny's Orphans*.

In his pursuit of diverse perspectives, he has traveled to over a dozen countries across four continents. He even applied to NASA's space program. When not writing books, he is a marketing consultant and college professor. You can learn more about J.R. at www.JRBale.com.



STORY EXCERPT

The following is an excerpt from a story *Last Camper at Thoreau* by J.R. Bale

Max, age 12, got off the bus in Long Lake, New York. It had been a long ride from New Jersey. The woman who sat next to him since Albany snored all the way to Saratoga. Max wouldn't say her breath was actually bad. It was just a strange mixture of apple-cinnamon and bubble gum.

Long Lake was where his parents told him to get off the bus. Max wrestled his backpack and sleeping bag down from the overhead rack. As he got off the bus, he thought he would see a sign or a guide waiting. Nothing indicated anything about Camp Thoreau.

"Do you know how to get to Camp Thoreau?" he asked the bus driver.

"Never heard of it, kid." The driver said. "Next stop is Saranac Lake, leaving in ten minutes, or as soon as I use the restroom and get some coffee."

Max looked around. There didn't seem to be any obvious authority figure around. No guides or police officers. He did see a couple leaving the Adirondack Hotel, which was the closest building to the bus stop.

"Excuse me, do you know where Camp Thoreau is?" The woman looked to the man. "Are they still operating?"

The man shrugged.

"Ruby," the man suddenly called out to a woman who was passing by, "Are you still supplying Camp Thoreau?"

"Yeah, headed there in 'bout half an hour."

"This young man is trying to get the camp."

"Is he?" A mildly shocked look crossed her face.

"Okay, kid. Wanna lift?"

Max shook his head. "Yes, please."

"Okay, you give me a hand loading some boxes into the truck, and I'll give you a lift."

Max agreed. They walked down the street and to the back of a food market.

"Throw your stuff in the back of that green pick-up, and follow me."

They loaded boxes of what seemed to be snack foods: chips, candy bars, and such. As they drove the twenty minutes to the camp, Ruby didn't seem to be much of a talker. They turned off the highway onto a dirt road, going past a "Camp Thoreau" sign.

"All right, here we are," she said very matter-of-factly, as she stopped the truck. "I'm gonna unload this stuff at the barn. I think the building you gotta go to is that white house over there. But what do I know?"

"Want some help unloading?"

"Nah, I got it. Good luck with your camping, kid."

The camp seemed oddly quiet. Max pulled out his cellphone to see if there were any messages from his parents, but the power was completely drained. He thought he had charged it before leaving home this morning. Max walked to the building that looked like a house, the one Ruby indicated. He knocked on the door. After a moment, a thin older man answered the door. He didn't seem dressed for a summer camp at all.

"You're late," the man said. "Did you bring the refills for the vending machine?"

"I think that woman, Ruby, did. But, I'm just a camper. My parents signed me up."

"A camper? What camp?"

Max pointed to the sign across the field. "Camp Thoreau."

The man snorted. "Camp Thoreau is closed."

"It can't be."

"It most certainly can. And, it is."

"I just traveled 300 miles on a bus to get here, if you don't believe me."

"I'll trust your account of the distance traveled. But, neither of those things changes the fact of Camp Thoreau's closure."

"How can it be closed?"

"It ceased operation. You'll have to go home."

"I don't know how to get home. I don't have another bus ticket. Can I use your phone to call my parents?"

The man seemed mildly annoyed.

"I'll have to ask Mr. Nickelbottom. Please wait here."

Max looked around. He had to admit the place looked pretty deserted. How did his parents not know the camp had closed? The man returned.

"Mr. Nickelbottom will see you now."

"So, you're like a butler?" Maz asked as he passed through the door.

"No, not like a butler. I am a butler. The name is Selby."
"Nice to meet you, Mr. Selby. I'm Max." Max's parents always taught him to be polite.

"The pleasure is all yours."

"So, you're like Alfred in Batman?"

"I'm afraid there's no secret crimefighting here," Selby said. "At least, not yet," he whispered.

They entered a room to find an older man reading some papers at a rolltop desk.

"Mr. Nickelbottom, this is the young man in question."

The man turned and smiled.

"Hi there. What's your name?"

"Max Cooper, sir."

"Well, Max. This is a bit awkward. Camp Thoreau closed two weeks ago."

"How?"

"It seems they went bankrupt a couple of months ago, something about a lawsuit. I bought the place in a foreclosure sale. I was told they notified all the campers."

"What am I going to do?"

"Well, I suppose you should call your parents."

"Can I borrow your cellphone? Mine doesn't seem to be working."

"I'm afraid you won't get a signal all the way out here. We're too far from any cell towers."

Max started to feel panic.

"But not to worry," Nickelbottom said, "you can use our land line."

"We need to do it right away," Max said. "My parents are going to Jamaica."

"Selby, please show Max to the phone."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, sir."

The phone was an old one, sitting on a weathered wooden side table. It even had a dial. He used the dial, just like he had seen in movies.

"Hi, you've reached the Cooper family," his father's recorded voice said. "We're on vacation right now. But leave a message and we'll get back to you upon our return." Then the beep sounded.

"Mom! Dad!" Max said in a panic. "They closed Camp Thoreau. There's nobody here but two old guys. And my cellphone doesn't work here. There's no signal."

"You might want to provide your parents with this telephone number to call," Selby said softly. He pointed to a yellowed label on the old phone. Max nodded.

"The number here is 624-7133. I hope you get this message."

Selby just walked away. Max followed him back to Mr. Nickelbottom.

"So, Max, what did your parents have to say?" Mr. Nickelbottom asked.

"They weren't there," he said. "I think they already left for Jamaica."

"Ah, this is rather awkward."

"Perhaps the Sheriff?" Selby offered.

"What's the Sheriff going to do, arrest him?"

"Perhaps they could return him to his parents."

"In Jamaica?" Nickelbottom said. "I think we should take him in for the night. It seems the only decent thing to do. After all, his parents might still call back."

"Where should we put the boy?" Selby asked.

"Did you bring a tent?" Nickelbottom asked.

"No."

"Ah, wait a minute. There's that cabin down by the lake. I think those Thoreau people used it as a counselor's cabin or something like that. I saw some cots in there. And I see you have a sleeping bag."

They walked down the hill to the cabin. It was fairly basic, but it had a clean, modern bathroom. In the main room were two rows of cots.



"You'll have your choice of cots. Why don't you wash up and come back up to the main house for dinner?"

Max nodded.

"See you then."

An hour later, Max walked up the hill. He passed what looked like an archery range. In the distance, there was a tall wooden tower with zip lines attached. Riding a zip line was something he had been looking forward to. Now, he suspected that would not happen. He arrived back at Mr. Nickelbottom's house and knocked. This time Mr. Nickelbottom answered the door.

"Ah, Max, come in. Selby is about to serve dinner. I hope you brought your appetite. Have a seat."

"Sir, if you're not running the camp, what do you do?"

"I'm an angel investor."

"You invest in angels?"

(Continued on Page 6)

Off the Shelf

Dear Orchid

By Carol Van Den Hende

Told through a mix of true stories and new fiction, *Dear Orchid* opens the heart in unexpected ways: through loss and love, silence and recovery, and the hard-won resilience of people who don't always fit the mold.

Learn more at www.carolvandenhende.com.



(Continued from Page 5)

Nickelbottom laughed. "I would, if I could. No, what I mean is that I invest money in small companies, so they can grow. I've invested in some doozies. Just last week, I invested in a company that trains pet psychics."

"Pet psychics?"

"Yeah, pretty crazy. But some of the greatest companies start with crazy ideas."

Selby brought out dinner.

"What do we have tonight, Selby?"

"The first course is a Spicy Moroccan Carrot Salad with Mango Chutney."

"And what after this?"

"Pork tenderloin with cocoa and cinnamon dry rub."

Mr. Nickelbottom smiled at the expression on Max's face.

"Not what you were expecting at summer camp?"

"Yeah, thought it would be more hamburgers and hot dogs."

"I'm sure it was at Camp Thoreau. But wouldn't that be boring?"

"But this is good too."

"You're a very polite young man." Mr. Nickelbottom chuckled.

"My mother says manners are important."

"Often. But sometimes it's more important to say what you think."

Max ate what was served without complaint, although not all of it.

"Hungry for dessert, Max?"

"Sure."

"I always go hunting for my dessert. Let's head for the rifle range."

"The rifle range?"

"Yup!" Nickelbottom said with a grin.

As they walked outside, Max recognized the entrance to the rifle range from the brochure for Camp Thoreau. The main difference was that there was a vending machine where the targets were supposed to be. The front glass

had been removed from the machine, but all the racks inside were full of snacks. Max started to walk toward the vending machines.

"Whoa," Nickelbottom called out, "you never just walk onto a shooting range. Safety first!"

He gestured Max toward a wooden platform.

"Have you ever fired a rifle before?"

"Only at a carnival."

"Well, we use live ammo here. So, we must observe safety protocols. If you shoot it, it's yours."

"Shoot the vending machines?"

"We target the snacks in the vending machines."

Tonight, I'm feeling like a Snickers bar. But you might want to target a bag of chips or popcorn. They're easier to hit. I'll go first."

Nickelbottom lay down on the mat on the wooden platform, picked up the rifle and lined up his shot.

"We use .22 caliber. Seems more sporting that way." He exhaled and squeezed the trigger.

"How did I do, Selby?"

Selby held up a pair of binoculars.

"Bullseye, right through the K, sir."

"Excellent. Your turn, Max."

Max lay on the shooting mat. He aimed for one of the popcorn bags and fired.

"In the upper left quadrant of the Wispy's Kettle Corn," Selby announced.

"Not bad for a first try."

They lay down their rifles, opened the chambers, and removed the brass shell casings.

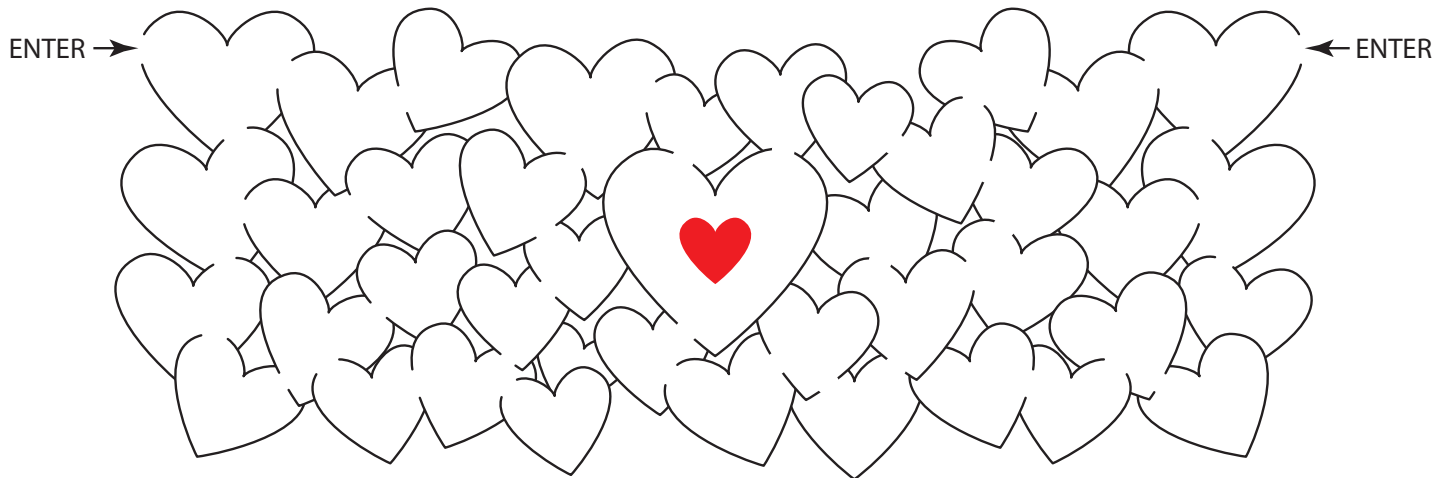
"Time to retrieve our prizes. Nothing like shooting your own food."

They opened their respective prizes. After another couple of hours, Max headed back to the counselors' cabin. It had been a long day. While Mr. Nickelbottom seemed nice, shooting food in a vending machine was pretty weird. As he drifted off to sleep, he wondered if his parents had gotten his voice message.

R

MENTAL WORKOUT

Heart Maze



H	W	H	S	W	E	E	T	H	E	A	R	T	W
D	X	K	E	Z	T	A	G	H	I	E	D	L	X
H	Q	C	Y	Z	A	F	Y	H	L	H	V	N	L
O	T	B	A	Y	M	S	M	A	A	M	O	R	N
N	V	W	T	T	L	D	T	G	S	M	Q	H	X
I	A	J	A	Q	U	I	Q	N	P	E	J	B	T
K	L	B	W	C	O	G	Z	I	I	G	S	C	Q
G	E	J	U	N	S	C	I	T	N	A	M	O	R
N	N	C	S	P	Q	A	Y	A	H	I	J	M	R
R	T	H	I	P	W	D	D	D	N	R	O	H	P
E	I	E	M	L	H	T	I	H	N	R	W	K	Z
P	N	A	Q	O	W	N	H	L	E	A	F	J	Y
Z	E	R	P	V	N	M	G	E	M	M	C	O	T
F	X	T	N	E	M	T	I	M	M	O	C	Z	Z
Q	W	T	R	R	F	L	O	W	E	R	S	L	M

Valentine Search

AMOR
 CANDY
 COMMITMENT
 DATING
 DINNER
 FLOWERS
 HEART
 LOVE
 MARRIAGE
 RELATIONSHIP
 ROMANTIC
 ROSES
 SOULMATE
 SWEETHEART
 VALENTINE

RANDOM THOUGHT BUBBLE

More Stuff to Wonder About

Do younger snails tell older snails to slow down and take it easy?

Do imaginary friends network with each other?

Why isn't procrastinating an olympic sport?

Is it wrong to buy marshmallows for when the Earth burns?

Do moon landing deniers and flat Earthers feel any kinship?

How long does a pregnant pause have to be before it becomes an awkward silence?

What do they call French toast in France?

Fuzzy memories are so different than warm-and-fuzzy memories. Why does temperature make such a difference?

Why is there never a crossbow around when you need one?

How can you fake authenticity?



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Your contact information will never be sold. I would also enjoy any feedback. Tell me what you like and don't like so much.

Thanks and be well.

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