

## **The Abodale Hotel and Suites**

Those who check into the Abodale Hotel and Suites just outside Balcones, Texas are usually unprepared for the exquisite and ethereal experience that awaits them within the fading azure terracotta walls. Sitting at a lofty five stories in height and boasting over one hundred and seventy five luxury rooms, the Abodale is among the fourteen largest buildings in the Balcones area; yet, if you ask any of the town's current residents, all you will receive is a blank stare followed by a glowing recommendation of the continental breakfast and fluorescent pool that the kids just can't seem to get enough of.

The Abodale was founded in 1908 by Jeremiah Abodale, an up-and-coming hotel magnate who sadly passed away mere weeks before the completion of his flagship hotel. During a routine inspection of the construction, a falling piece of reinforced rebar struck Mr. Abodale in the head, killing him as instantly as could be expected. This unfortunate accident was ruled his official cause of death until 2006, when new advancements in DNA technology curiously revealed the true cause of death to be hepatitis.<sup>1</sup>

The strange happenings rumored to occur at the Abodale Hotel and Suites have never been conveniently explained by any one particular source or happening – if one can even go so far as to allege that there are any strange happenings occurring at all. Those who incur a stay

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<sup>1</sup> During principal planning Jeremiah was given the choice between two parcels of land upon which to build, one being a Hasinai burial site. Thankfully, Jeremiah opted for the non-burial site—not out of fear of angering any ancient spirits, but simply because he thought that building on a cemetery seemed like a not so nice thing to do. Mr. Abodale was truly ahead of his time in this respect, and his decision has prompted several leading Abodale enthusiasts to conjecture that this basic kindness pleased the ethereal spirits of the Hasinai, which bestowed upon the Hotel and Suites its alleged unique properties. Interestingly, no one has thought to consult the descendents of this tribe, who now reside in the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma and find the entire idea completely preposterous, to say the least.

within the Abodale speak of their time with a distant look in their eyes, as if they can still make out the hazy lines of blue terracotta through an almost impermeable fog. Then, seemingly without fail, their eyes will slide back into place, followed by a glowing recommendation of the continental breakfast and fluorescent pool that the kids just can't seem to get enough of.

— Day One —

On June 7th, 2013, Orman Caldwell checked into the Abodale for a stay of two nights while attending a regional conference in Balcones. A bureaucrat by both trade and temperament, Orman was accompanied by his wife, Eleanor, and their three children: Sarah, age nine; Dorah, age seven; and, coincidentally, Jeremiah, (Jamey for short), age five. Normally a routine business conference would not have warranted a full-family vacation. Indeed, Orman knew that many of his colleagues savored such occasions as a well deserved rest from the overwhelming responsibilities and pressures they faced at home, such as watching golf on the weekends and concealing extramarital affairs. However, as it was the children's summer vacation, Orman decided it was never too early to get one's children hooked on regional networking opportunities and announced that the family would be accompanying him to Balcones.

Eight hours, seven pee breaks, and one carsick vomiting session later (young Jamey does not have the stomach of his sisters), the Caldwell family pulled into the parking lot of the Abodale Hotel and Suites, thoroughly exhausted and ready for a relaxing evening of fine dining and fluorescent floating. At the counter Orman was greeted cheerily by Mr. Forcet, the concierge of the Abodale Hotel and Suites. A step under six feet and gifted with a bulbous

mustache nearly as off-putting as his smile, Mr. Forcet is gifted with the rare ability to see into the depths of one's soul and determine in an absolutist fashion the nature of their true character. This makes Mr. Forcet an excellent accommodator, and a quick inspection of the Caldwell family was more than enough to determine that Room 248 would suit them nicely. Perhaps, if he had not been so exhausted from the day, Orman would have been taken aback at the existence of a suite with both a king and triple bunk twin bed, but as it was he was more than happy to only book one room. A pencil pusher and enthusiastic capitalist, Orman was never one to pass up inconveniencing his children to save a quick buck. Mr. Forcet printed room keys for Orman and Eleanor before waving the family towards what was currently the eastern staircase of the hotel. The family, tired as they were, opted for the elevator, which promptly took them to the third floor instead of the second, where Orman led the family in several concentric circles before realizing that he must have pressed the wrong button. Chortelling together over the mishap, the Caldwells took the (conveniently located) stairs down to the second floor, where they found Room 248 without further difficulty.

In true fatherly fashion, within five minutes of spotting the couch in their suite, Orman was soundly asleep upon it, feet propped on a cushion placed ever so delicately on the coffee table in front of him. Orman learned long ago that sleeping parallel to the couch was not considered 'manly' or 'fatherly', and that there was nothing more masculine than perpendicular angles. This of course conflicted with his well-bred bureaucratic instinct to be as parallel as possible, and he resolved this by placing his shoulders in the corner of the couch so that his legs extended out at a perfect forty five degree angle. A little odd looking, to be sure, but a happy medium, which is none too easy to come across in life.

As Orman's snores harmonized with the grating rasp of the air conditioner, Eleanor set about settling her three children into the suite. The primary issue, of course, was that of bunk placement. Sarah, the oldest, demanded use of the bottom bunk by seniority. Dorah, an avid reader, demanded the bottom bunk as well, as the lighting was better for her books. Jamey demanded the bottom bunk because he was the youngest and knew it would add to the chaos. As is the nature of these things, Eleanor gave the bunk to Jamey. While to her daughters the decision bordered on tyranny, Eleanor did so for two reasons. First, she had a headache and did not want to deal with the tantrum she knew Jamey would eventually throw that evening until her Xanax kicked in. More altruistically, Eleanor was reasonably sure that Jamey had a bladder infection (six of the seven pee breaks that day had been at his request), and she knew that his incessant bathroom visits would ruin all of their sleep if he was forced to rattle his way down the bunks multiple times during the night.

Unfortunately, Eleanor forgot something that all parents with more than two children inevitably will: her middle child. By placing Jamey on the bottom bunk and declaring the matter settled, she forced Dorah into the top bunk. For those unfamiliar with the triple bunk setup, lying horizontally on the top bunk yields a space of just under eleven inches between the sheets and the ceiling. While this is technically enough space to place a book between the near-glistening plaster ceiling and the eyes of the reader, it is a less than ideal reading experience by almost any measure.<sup>2</sup>

To her credit, Dorah did not think of herself as particularly forgettable. For one, she was

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<sup>2</sup> Those familiar with the mathematical concept of metric spaces will, of course, recognize the exception of the discrete metric, in which all nonzero distances are quite literally one and the same.

the only member of the Caldwells to have light blue eyes, not brown. All of Dorah's favorite characters from her books had blue eyes, and during family movie nights she was always watching to see which actors had eyes that made them special like her. It was a small thing, but to a middle child in the grips of adolescence it was quite possibly the most important thing in the world.

Still grumbling over her predicament, Dorah trudged along behind her family as they made their way down to the pool for an hour of soaking and awkward poolside conversation before dinner. Eleanor had decided not to wake Orman, figuring that her children could go an hour without hearing him ramble about optimal inventory growth trends. Oblivious to the fact that Room 248 was now on the third floor, it took Eleanor and the children almost ten minutes to locate the pool. Only Sarah, who dreamed of one day becoming an engineer, wondered how all the piping and drainage worked when the pool was on the fourth floor. However, the thoughts of a nine year old are fickle things, and soon Sarah was busy flicking water at her sister, who was attempting to use some of the remaining daylight to finish her book.

By this time Eleanor's Xanax was in full swing, and Mrs. Caldwell spent a majority of the late afternoon dividing her attention between the ceiling and Horace Shoemaker, the reasonably attractive if not slightly underage hotel lifeguard who was slumbering peacefully in his high chair. Had the subtle thrumming of the Xanax not been pleasantly dulling her thoughts, Eleanor might have noticed that this was the first hotel she had ever stayed at that employed a lifeguard. As it was, her placid gaze was elsewhere when Jamey strayed a step too far into the deep end of the pool and began to drown. Through some combination of the fluorescents and the dimming of his life force, Jamey felt his soul briefly depart his body and float sideways toward a

nearby ventilation shaft. Thankfully, though Horace Shoemaker's body was soundly asleep, his metaphysical essence was sharper than shattering glass, and the lifeguard was able to succinctly reel in Jamey's consciousness and gently guide it back into its host body before it was lost to the unrelenting ether.<sup>3</sup> Sarah, who as the oldest sibling often found herself doing things that should probably be dealt with by adults, was the one to pull her brother's body from the deep end of the pool. For one panicked moment, looking down into the hollow voids that used to be her brother's eyes, she thought her brother was dead. It must have been a trick of the fluorescence, however, as, after a moment, Jamey jerked up, sputtering some nonsense about being pulled through time. Eleanor gently chided (the now physically awake) Horace before departing back to their room, though her hand rested on his shoulder for perhaps a second longer than was appropriate. Children see more than most parents think they do, and this subtle affection was enough to convince Jamey that his mother could not be trusted with the fact that the lifeguard was most likely a ghost/wizard hybrid of some kind. Only Dorah seemed to notice that the lifeguard had deep azure eyes, the same color as the Abodale itself.

Room 248 was conveniently where they had left it; inside they found a reasonably flustered Orman, who was equal parts thankful that he had not been dragged down to the pool and bruised that no one had thought to consult him beforehand. After a terse dinner of Kentucky Fried Chicken and intermittent silences, the Caldwell family settled in for the night, lulled gently to sleep by the rattling air conditioning and elephantine snores of their patriarch. Only Dorah remained alert, desperately trying to angle her nightlight in a way that could illuminate the

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<sup>3</sup> If one were to check Mr. Shoemaker's CV, they would find that the 'lifeguard' position is referred to as 'soulguard'. Technically 'head soulguard', but this is only because his manager was guillotined during the French Revolution.

shadowy pages of her book in the cramped space between sheets and ceiling. Thus Dorah was the only one to notice Mr. Forcet's shadow slither across the wall as the concierge slipped into the view of her nightlight. After placing a complementary goody basket on the dining table, the concierge turned to Dorah and placed one elongated finger to his lips, the ghost of a smile etching the corners of his mouth. As Dorah stared at the man, she could've sworn she saw the shadow behind him contort into outlines too familiar to be coincidence. Then he was gone, leaving Dorah with the fantasies of both her book and her mind as the night twinkled ever deeper.

— Day Two —

The following morning every member of the Caldwell family except Orman was woken by the screech of his alarm, and Eleanor briefly considered asphyxiating her husband before he stirred to life and yawned his way over to the clock. Then, Orman lumbered into the bathroom for his morning shower, nearly tripping over Dorah, who had spent the night on the floor for reasons Orman was too sleepy to care about. One crisp five minute shower later, Orman led his bleary eyed family down to the first floor for one of the best breakfasts of his life. The scrambled eggs and bacon were scrumptious enough to be thoroughly enjoyed while maintaining the bland, dry texture that appealed to some deeper part of his soul. The consistency of the children's cereal was only slightly differentiable from the miniature box it was packaged in, which Orman thought was a valuable lesson that all things are hollow inside, even the things with flashy packaging. Eleanor was thrilled to discover the existence of a cash bar located just outside the designated breakfast area; after one of the bloodier marys this side of the Mississippi, she was able to

successfully tune out the incessant pleas from Jamey about returning to the pool as soon as possible.

Shortly after breakfast, Orman departed for the duration of his conference, which was located conveniently ten minutes due east at the Balcones Regional Convention Center, the community's bastion of public events since the mid-twentieth century. There he would spend the day learning about the hidden secrets of meaningful task proclivities and accelerated business expenditures, never faltering in his ability to firmly shake a hand or proffer a tasteless joke. Orman received twenty seven business cards and distributed thirty one, a steadfast ratio if ever he'd seen one. Not once did he ponder what his family would be up to that day or how this day might shape the years to come.

Following breakfast, Eleanor shuttled the children back up to the room, only to realize that Dorah was still asleep on the bathroom floor. After chiding her middle daughter for having been forgotten, Dorah was sent down to the breakfast lounge to scrounge for whatever remnants had been overlooked by the other hotel occupants. Forgetting her earlier libations, Eleanor popped her morning Xanax and soon found herself sliding into something resembling a dream. She stood in the parking lot, gazing with an empty stare at the sharp royal blue tiling that outlined the Abodale Hotel and Suites of years gone by. Vaguely remembering her children, Eleanor began to make her way inside, stepping up to the large glass doors that separated her from the atrium. She paused for a moment to read over a small paper taped to the door. The words, "We're Hiring!" were etched across the page in deep blue ink. For a moment, Eleanor considered the life she could have here, away from her husband and children. She snorted to herself, amused that her fantasies had devolved into abandoning one life of accommodation for



another, and pushed inside the hotel.

Eleanor found herself sitting by the pool, staring longingly at Horace Shoemaker as he sat on his perch, overseeing the goings on of the pool. For an aching moment their eyes met, and Eleanor could swear she detected a flash of pity in the young man's eyes. She felt as though he saw something in her no one else had, and the thought terrified her enough to avert her eyes to where a family splashed together in the shallows. The water seemed to flow around them in an unusual way, the flecks of moisture in the air catching the fluorescent light and playing tricks on her eyes. An illusion danced above the family, each member recreated in flashes and twinkles of light bending through the shimmering droplets. It was a visceral and violent affair. The family of reflections tore at each other above the water, each playful swipe a clawed lunge, hatred and malice etched in the faces flashing in the air. Eleanor knew then that this was no illusion, that it never had been one and never would. One of the children, a young boy with glassy blue eyes, looked over at her, and Eleanor found herself filled with an unwanted sadness for this boy, trapped as he was in this dance of pleasantries and performance. Then she felt a hand gently upon her shoulder, and looked up to see Horace Shoemaker standing over her, gazing out at the water with eyes like a dying sun, painted the most royal shade of blue.

As Eleanor arrived at the inevitable conclusion that she would leave her husband, Sarah was once again left in charge of organizing her siblings. Though only nine years old, Sarah was beginning to understand that she hated her mother; it would not be until several years after the coming divorce that she learned to pity her.

Dorah had still not returned from breakfast, and so Sarah decided to give in to Jamey's near constant pleas to return to the pool. Ten minutes later (once Jamey had used the restroom

not once but *twice*), Sarah left Room 248 with her younger brother and took the stairs up to the fourth floor where the pool had been located only hours before. She was met instead with a comprehensive map of the Abodale, revealing that the pool lay at the southwest corner of the *first* floor. While this made no sense to Sarah, she supposed that she must have been more exhausted than she thought the night before. After all, how could a pool have been on the fourth floor?

As they made their way to the stairs, out of the corner of her eye Sarah caught a glimpse of Dorah prowling across a distant hallway, no signs of breakfast in sight. Sarah called out to her, and Dorah promptly pelted around a corner and out of sight. The challenge accepted without question, Sarah bolted off down the patterned hallway after her sister, leaving Jamey to totter vaguely in the direction of the pool.

Dorah had been anything but hungry that morning, and had instead opted to roam the hotel until her mother came looking. She should have known that her nosy sister would be the one sent after her, and, for reasons siblings often have trouble expressing, Dorah knew that she needed to run from her sister as fast as her legs would take her. Unfortunately, Dorah was known neither for her speed nor her durability, and soon she was panting heavily as her aching feet carried her from one hallway to the next.

The halls of the Abodale Hotel and Suites are not laid out in a traditional fashion, opting instead for what a higher dimensional being might describe as an M.C. Escher style consortium of passageways, gates, vortices, and funnels. To Dorah, however, this presented itself as nothing more than a conveniently laid out maze of halls and corridors to duck and weave through, and after several minutes she felt confident that her sister was sufficiently far enough behind her.

Taking stock of her surroundings, Dorah realized that she was now on the fifth floor of the Hotel, though she couldn't remember taking any stairs during her mad dash to freedom. Shrugging off the impossible as children so often do, Dorah decided that it was as good a place as any to do some exploring. All of the doors stood a little taller up here, she thought, and the pattern of the carpet that spanned the hallway had shifted to a collage of crimsons and cardinals, weaving and undulating together like splices of DNA. It seemed to be leading Dorah onward, down the passage and around several corners until she found herself in a large lounge with a stunning view of the greater Balcones area. Dorah had never been on the fifth floor of anything before, and she pressed her cheeks against one of the arching windows to get a better view of her surroundings. As the young girl looked out at the ephemeral view provided by the Abodale, the deep sapphire eyes of Mr. Forcet inspected her from across the room. After a period of precise observation, the concierge adjusted his tie oh-so-minutely before gliding across the lounge. He placed a warm hand on Dorah's shoulder, making her jump. Waving away her apologies for wandering like one might remove a fly from their food, Mr. Forcet congratulated Dorah for her daring escape with a conspiratorial wink. As she looked up at the large man, a broad smile inched its way out from under his bulbous mustache. Though the sun poured in through the magnificent windows of the Abodale's VIP lounge, Mr. Forcet cast no observable shadow.

“Tell me, Dorah,” said the man, his smile spreading like a spilled glass of water, “how would you like to meet the owner of our wonderful little hotel? I believe he has quite the proposition for you...”

Horace Shoemaker slumbered peacefully in his highchair as Jamey made his way to the deepest edge of the pool and fell into the water face first. Jamey had spent nearly every night of his young life being read to by his middle sister as he drifted off to sleep; his dreams were filled with secret worlds and noble quests that only he could fulfill. As it was, Jamey had convinced himself that whatever he had experienced in the pool the evening before was his secret world, and he was determined to return to it as quickly as possible. As the air was sucked from his lungs, Jamey could feel something deep within himself struggling for release, finally breaking free as the world around him began to grow dark. Jamey wriggled his soul out of his body as a caterpillar would extricate itself from a cocoon, a whole new world opening up to him with each push. Through a single minded intensity only children can possess, Jamey forced himself into the spectral plane, latching himself to a tendril of thought dangling from the ceiling to prevent himself from being swept away by the ventilation shaft. With eyes in a new world, Jamey was surprised to see his mother huddled in one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs that lined the pool, sobbing uncontrollably into the shoulder of Horace Shoemaker, who was looking down at her with the same tired smile his mother so often gave Jamey when he stubbed his toe or fell off his bicycle. Jamey had never seen his mother cry before, but decided that adults were probably supposed to cry in private and floated towards the pool doors and out into the hotel. As the doors shut behind him, Horace's head snapped around like a cracking joint, his eyes locked on the retreating boy as Jamey made his way into the unrelenting expanse of the Abodale. Jamey did not know what he was looking for as he drifted amongst the parts of the human psyche normally

only visible after considerable therapy, but he knew he would know it when he saw it. He floated past a man reading in a cushy armchair, his insides screaming for a wife he had lost seven years ago; a chef tasting her signature stew, yearning for the busboy and his unrelenting smile; a man trapped beneath sheets of terracotta as old as the hotel itself, struggling to free himself from both a solid metal bar and a rousing bout of hepatitis. Eventually, Jamey found himself on the third floor of the hotel in front of a door conspicuously labeled 723. Something about this room called to Jamey, and somewhere inside himself he knew that this was what had been reaching out to him since he first began to drown in the pool. As he reached out to propel himself through the door, it swung open without warning, revealing the man behind the counter, Mr. Forcet. Though the concierge was firmly planted in the physical realm, the slender man looked Jamey directly in the eyes as his smile shook ever so gently from side to side. “I’m so sorry my boy, but I am afraid that the position has just been filled. You need to have an eye for this sort of thing, and I am afraid yours just aren’t what we’re looking for.” And with that, the man reached out with two fingers and flicked Jamey’s soul with the force of a battering ram. Jamey was launched backward across the hotel, his life spinning around him with the centrifugal force of a small moon as he was catapulted back into his body, his mind sputtering to life as his body was dragged from the pool for the second time in two days by his eldest sister. Sarah was sure that this time her brother was dead—there were only so many times that her brother could try and drown himself before he succeeded. Nevertheless, Jamey’s eyes snapped open as she laid him against the soggy ground next the pool, and he thanked his sister by immediately throwing up all over her (young Jamey does not have the stomach of his sister). Sarah briefly considered pushing Jamey back into the pool and letting him drown for good, but distracted herself by

screaming every obscenity she could think of at the lifeguard, who to his credit remained soundly asleep throughout the whole affair. Pulling herself together as only an eldest sibling is capable of, Sarah heaved her brother to his feet and pushed him in front of her all the way back to Room 248, where she was gently chided by her mother for not checking in first before wandering the hotel. This did make Sarah feel slightly guilty, as it seemed her mother had been worried to tears.

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That evening, Orman returned to the Abodale Hotel and Suites, suitably tuckered out from a long day of networking and already looking forward to the lukewarm embrace of his wife and the unrelenting banter of his children. Corporate sales put him in a good mood like nothing else could, and upon stepping into Room 248 he proudly announced his return to the suite at large. When no one responded, Orman peeked his head into the bedroom to see his wife and two children soundly asleep in their beds. For the first time, Orman was struck as to how lucky he was that the Abodale had a suite with both a king sized bed and a double twin bunk bed for his children. Smiling to himself, Orman settled down on the couch at a perfect forty five degree angle and cracked open a beer from the complementary goodie basket that he'd found by the door. Before long he was sound asleep, that timeless symphony of snoring and seeping air filling the silence of the Abodale for one last night.

— Day Three —

The next morning, following another exquisite breakfast Orman turned in the keys to Room 248 at precisely 6:45am and thanked Mr. Forcet for an exceptional stay at the Abodale Hotel and Suites. The concierge graced him with his trademark smile and reassured Orman that the pleasure was all his. As is often the case of parents with two children, Orman was easily able to keep track of his progeny as he herded them towards the elevator. He was so busy getting the family on the road by 7:00 that he failed to notice that his wife had refused to make eye contact with him since he returned from the conference, or that the pool (on the ground level this morning) now had a second, smaller lifeguard standing beside the first. Though it may have been a trick of the fluorescents, if anyone had been observing this lifeguard they would have sworn they saw her light blue eyes dampen to a pleasantly royal blue. As the family car pulled out of the parking lot of the Abodale Hotel and Suites, Eleanor Caldwell watched Mr. Forcet step out of the double glass doors that marked the physical boundary of the hotel and gently remove a piece of paper taped to the door. He gave the Caldwell's car a little wave as it sped into the distance, filled with the sounds of Orman's praise for the continental breakfast and the fluorescent pool his little Jamey just couldn't seem to get enough of.