

Model 'over the hill' at age 14

Life is hard. My daughter Malphasias, poor kid, had to renounce her career as a sexy, high-fashion model.

"It's no good, Daddy," she told me, tears in her mascaraed, green-shadowed, black-lined eyes. "I'm over the hill."

I tried to think of some comforting remark, but what could I say? She is, after all, 14.

arthur hoppe

I did the best I could. "You don't look a day over 12 to me, honey," I said, patting the back of her purple-sequined Givenchy.

"Nice try, Dad," she said, managing a wry smile. "But I know what the mirror tells me. I've had my shot at fame and fortune. And now the time has come, as it must to all, for me to step aside and give some young hopeful a chance. I can no longer compete with the likes of Tamara Jones."

"Who's Tamara Jones?"

"Don't you read the papers, Dad? Tamara's the rage of New York. She's the sexiest, highest fashion model to hit the magazine covers in decades. And she's really got youth going for her. She's 11."

"So she has a few years on you, kid. Experience counts, too, you know."

"But I don't have enough, Dad. I was an aging 12-year-old when that talent scout, Humbert Humbert, spotted me playing jacks at P.S. 108."

Hotel . . .

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For instance, in *Garp*, shining like a gem in a crown, is a short story by the hero-writer called "The Pension Grill parzer." In it, an American family in Vienna take rooms in a strange inn (*pension*, in German) fraught with oddities — a man on his hands, a bear on a unicycle, Irving has taken that *pension* and made it into a full-blown *Hotel New Hampshire*.

He has given the hotel extra floors to fill with guests, terrorists and whores; he has given it before- and after-lives in America. He has made the story of the Berry family, the hotel's owners, into a saga of rags-to-riches and heartbreak, a grim fairy tale, an epic about resurrection, growth, and the lack thereof.

In *The Hotel New Hamp-*

shire, the family must grow if it is to survive the *Garp*-like world of calamity, suicide, rape and weak hearts. Egg, the youngest Berry, doesn't make it, nor does Lilly, the littlest. Frank, the oldest of the dwindling family, "would turn to believing only in Fate — in random fortune or random doom, in arbitrary slapstick or arbitrary sorrow." And John, the narrator, is forever a year behind his precocious sister Franny, the loudest of the Berry children, the Berry the world couldn't beat.

John's narration, the voice of the book, is the crafted prose of Irving at its finest. But because *Hotel* is

"Gee, kid, 12 is the prime of life."

"Heck, Dad, Tatum O'Neal was smoking cigarettes at 9 in *Paper Moon*. And when Brooke Shields was 12, she starred as a prostitute in *Pretty Baby*. By 14, she had already been naked, seduced and pregnant in *Blue Lagoon* — not to mention making those Calvin Klein commercials in which she says, 'You know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing.'"

"Well, what about Brooke Shields, kid? She's 15 now and if she can hang in there, why can't you?"

"I lost my youth early, Dad. Don't you remember? I showed the first signs of old age at 13."

"Oh, yes, that zit."

"And even Brooke is beginning to slip. Down at the Ford Agency, they're whispering that she looks 16 if she's a day."

"But how do you know you're over the hill, kid? You're only as old as you feel."

"It's the job offers, Dad. First, it was that Oil of Olay commercial. Then they wanted me to plug Porcelana for those horrid age spots. And now my agent just asked me to be the housewife with chapped hands in the Palmolive dishwashing soap commercial."

"Don't cry, honey," I said. "There are other things in life than being a sexy, high-fashion model."

"Don't worry, Dad. I'm not going to retire and raise cats. I've already undergone second career counseling and they recommended a re-entry program. So I'm going back into the ninth grade next week and take a course on crocheting antimacassars at home for fun and profit."

"Good for you, kid," I said, but my heart wasn't in it. Poor thing. Another tragic pre-teen career burnout. Oh, how fleeting is youth! Particularly in America.

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written in first-person and has a wider scope, the reading is diffused and less compelling than in *Garp*, the birth-to-death of one character. And because *Hotel*, unlike *Garp*, is about survivors, not casualties, there are fewer of the marvellous epitaphs Irving sends his characters out of the plot.

His epitaphs are becoming elegies. Greater compassion subdues some of his muscular, madcap tone. Irving's vision is increasingly becoming that of a family man.

Even his ubiquitous bears have changed somewhat. In earlier novels, they are pitiable, majestic creatures that

have been caged or taught dumb tricks by ridiculous people. Now Irving's bears at last have escaped the wiles of society.

The several bears that pass through *The Hotel New Hampshire* have a new symbolism. They are cuddly, mighty things that protect their kin to the death. They represent the bonds that must be forged if we are to live in the mindless, big world. (Why do you think Irving chose the name *Berry* anyway?)

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