

THE CENTENARIAN PLAY

CAST OF CHARACTERS

The Writer

Luck

Elizabeth Hammer

Australia Hopson

Delmar Hopkins

Fred Scott

Vance Trimble

(Setting: 3 chairs at a card table with a typewriter on it, downstage bench, upstage left are two additional chairs, upstage right, one chair and small table to set the typewriter and plant on later.

From SR to SL, Elizabeth, Vance and Fred are frozen in a tableau at the card table. Elizabeth has a book open in her hands. Vance has his hands on the typewriter keys. Fred is holding a plant.

Delmar and Australia sit in the house.)

WRITER

So, I'm fifty years old and I get this request- creative challenge- to write a play about Centenarians. One Hundred Year Olds. I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but personally, aging is not my favorite subject.

(beat)

I'm not talking about the physical changes, wrinkles and sagging skin—that's nothing compared to the countless other ways your body can go haywire. I'm talking about fear. That sick-to-your stomach feeling when you realize you may never get to do the things you planned because time is running out!

(LUCK enters in a dark top and jeans, scarf around her neck. Inside one pocket is a cell phone. In her hands she shuffles a pack of playing cards.)

LUCK

Or, if you're lucky, you might have forty years to go! Pick a card, any card.

WRITER

Who are you?

LUCK

The first thing you thought of when you started this play.

WRITER

I was thinking of good genes. Longevity genes.

LUCK

You were thinking of me. Luck. Pick a card.

(The Writer ignores her. Luck folds her cards together.)

WRITER

(to the audience)

What I want to know is, how can someone even live to be a hundred? Really. How good can they feel? What quality of life can they have?

LUCK

Don't give yourself a stroke. Relax. Deep breaths. Breathe in, out. Good. If you want to know how it feels to live to a hundred, you need to go to the source. The oldest person I know right now is Delmar Hopkins.

(She gestures to Delmar in the audience. He joins her onstage.)

DELMAR

(to the audience)

Afternoon, everybody. How you all doing? You doing okay?

LUCK

Delmar's a hundred and four.

WRITER

No way.

DELMAR

Born in Honey Grove, Texas. Parents moved from West Dennison, Texas, to Chickasha, Oklahoma. Rode a bike back and forth from town every day to work at the WPA—

WRITER

I'm not sure they know what that is. The Works Project—

(Luck, who has googled the answer on her phone, interrupts.)

LUCK

Administration, started in 1935. Put millions of unemployed people to work building schools, post offices, parks and roads.

WRITER

(Annoyed.)

Thanks.

DELMAR

One of my bike trips, I stopped to get a drink of water in a used car lot. The guy's son seen my bike and wanted it. He said, you can pick out any car on that lot and you can trade even for your bike. I picked a 29 Chevrolet.

LUCK

He's got a PT Cruiser now.

DELMAR

Highway Patrol pulled me over on the way to Norman a few weeks ago. I was going 'bout eighty-five, catching every light. He looked at my license

LUCK

Which said he was a hundred, when, actually, he was a hundred and four.

(as the Highway Patrol)

You still driving? Do me a favor. Try to stick within the speed limit.

DELMAR

I put my cruise control on now.

WRITER

That's amazing. How do you do it? What's your secret?

(LUCK crosses to the card table, blowing life into the tableaux characters and introducing them in the process.)

ELIZABETH

Exercise!

LUCK

Elizabeth Hammer.

FRED

Don't run around.

LUCK

Fred Scott.

(Beckoning to Australia in the audience)

Australia Hopson.

AUSTRALIA

I don't drink. Not because I'm so good. I just can't stand it.

DELMAR

Know what white lightning is? I used to drink white lightning. Tried bourbon, didn't like it. Tried scotch, didn't like it, so I started drinking vodka. Drank vodka every day for sixty years. Finally, just give it up.

WRITER
(to Luck)

See, that's another thing that drives me crazy! You read all these articles about how to live longer. Eat right, exercise, don't drink, don't smoke—

LUCK

Delmar smoked. For a while.

WRITER
(to Delmar)

So, basically, you did everything wrong. Which proves it all comes back to genes.

DELMAR

It's almost up to you to live a long time, whether you know it or not. My doctor told me, "You know the way to live life. If you didn't, you'd be dead." People out there, worrying about things. I don't worry. I keep a good attitude.

(Luck blows life into Vance Trimble.)

LUCK

Vance, what do you think?

VANCE

Hmmm? Excuse me?

LUCK

What's the secret to long life?

VANCE

Fall in love and stay in love.

LUCK

Have you started your autobiography?

(to the others)

I've been bugging him about it for years.

VANCE

This is my to-do list for the day.

LUCK

He's busier than I am. Mr. Trimble here is a famous journalist. He won the Triple Crown in 1960.

(The Writer googles the award.)

DELMAR

I work at the racetrack nine months a year—

LUCK

This is a different kind of crown.

WRITER

(Reading)

Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting, the Sigma Delta Chi Distinguished Correspondence Record, and the Raymond Clapper Award for exceptional reporting.

ELIZABETH

That's wonderful! Congratulations!

FRED

Sounds like you know your business.

LUCK

He's written tons of biographies—who did you write about, again?

VANCE

E.W. Scripps, Happy Chandler, Sam Walton, Ronald Reagan—

WRITER

Hold on, hold on. We need to explain these people.

LUCK

(Reads from her phone)

Scripps, newspaper magnate and radio broadcaster. Chandler, Governor of Kentucky—Walton, Wal-Mart, obviously, and Reagan—

WRITER

An actor. And President. We know.

LUCK

Vance, dear, can we play cards at your desk?

VANCE

Be my guest. My wife, Elzene, was a great bridge player.

LUCK

Everybody, pull up a chair.

(The typewriter and plant are moved from the card table and two chairs brought in.)

ELIZABETH

What are we playing?

LUCK

Five card stud.

(to the Writer)

Join us?

WRITER

I don't gamble.

LUCK

If you crossed the street today, you gambled.

WRITER

What's the ante?

LUCK

A personal story.

WRITER

Sure. Count me in.

LUCK

Australia? Did you want to play?

ELIZABETH

I want to hear how you got your name. It's so pretty.

AUSTRALIA

Mama was pregnant and she and a friend had to help the teacher who was ill. They were looking in the geography book. First they said, "Asia? No, let's see. Australia. Yeah." Felt funny at first, being named after a country. But I enjoyed it once it happened. (beat) That ain't my story, though.

AUSTRALIA CONT.

I'm going to tell you a story about slavery days, when my Dad was a boy in Tennessee. He was carrying lumber to the plantation and he accidentally told some man in the lumber yard, he was going to count the lumber.

LUCK

(as the Man)

Hey, boy. How you going to count that lumber up?

AUSTRALIA

(as her father)

I'm going to count it up myself.

LUCK

How you learn to do that?

AUSTRALIA

I saw other people doing it and I tried it myself and I did it.

LUCK

You're lying to me, boy. I'm going to make you come down off that wagon. Make you pay for this lying to me.

AUSTRALIA

He hit it back to his Dad's. Grandpa put him in a wagon to get him to his brother's in Oklahoma. At one point, the man driving the wagon got stopped.

LUCK

(as Man who stopped him)

Where you going?

AUSTRALIA

(as Driver)

I'm going to market to sell these pigs to get some money to feed my family.

LUCK

I don't believe there's no pigs in there! Take that cover off. Let me see them pigs.

AUSTRALIA

Okay.

(She cracks an imaginary whip, and the horses break into a run)

They made it to Oklahoma! If they hadn't, there wouldn't have been no Papa.

LUCK

Fred, call? Or check?

FRED

Call. My dad skipped out. Mother went to live with her grandmother, my great-grandmother, okay? I'm a baby. We all took the typhoid fever in 1916. They told my mother, "If you can feed that baby, he might live." In other words, he's going to die. My mother said

LUCK

If he dies, I want to die.

FRED

She'd give me a drink of water and drink after me. She survived the typhoid but she died when I was four. (beat) Then my great-grandmother who'd been taking care of me died. My guardian—my great uncle—he put my little butt to work. Never gave me a dime in his life. Never bought me a coke or an ice cream cone. Had to stand on a box, but I could harness a team and go to field when I was twelve years old.

ELIZABETH

Call. My folks lived on my Mom's Cherokee Indian allotment, north of Grove. My Mom was Cherokee. Her father's parents were both on the Trail of Tears as teenagers. My father farmed, my mother raised a garden. My Dad's folks were into education. My mom's folks, the Smiths, they weren't into education. They liked music and things.

VANCE

Check.

LUCK

Tell your story anyway.

VANCE

My father was mayor of Harrison, Arkansas. There was a railroad strike in 1919. Led to mob rule. He took the side of peace, against mob rule, and was blackballed at being a lawyer. So he went to Okemah, Oklahoma in 1920. A lot of oil derricks there. A very busy court system.

WRITER

You expect me to follow that up? Forget it!

LUCK

(to the Writer.)

Maybe in sixty years, if you're *lucky* enough to live that long, you'll have some stories to match theirs.

WRITER

What about you? Don't you have to put in a story?

LUCK

Their stories are my stories because they all involve me. Five card draw. And the theme is love.

(She deals the cards.)

DELMAR

(Singing)

I can't stop loving you, I've made up my mind, to live in memory of the lonesome times—

LUCK

Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

Three. (beat) Tell you how I met my husband, Ellsworth. He'd never been married, never been involved. My sister and I had come home from Northeastern Teachers College in Tahlequah. I was raking the yard. Ellsworth came, all slicked up, white shoes, panama hat, white pants. Good looking. He said, "Would I like to go the show?" I got ready real quick.

(Australia joins them at the card table.)

AUSTRALIA

My husband was seven years older. He worked at the butcher's down the street.

VANCE

Two. (beat) I met my wife, Elzene, when she was a senior at Wewoka High School. I was a junior. She came up to me with a book and said

LUCK

John Wesley, here's your book back.

VANCE

I said, I'm not John Wesley, but I'll take the book. She said

LUCK

No, you won't.

ELIZABETH

Elzene. What a pretty name.

VANCE

I was editor of the school paper. She was business manager, so we were together a lot. We'd go to Robert's Drugstore, get a nickel coke, take two straws and split it. That was eighty years ago.

DELMAR

I been married three times.

FRED

My wife's Daddy was seventy-seven when she was born. He fought in the Civil War, not World War I, the Civil War. First time I seen her, she was eight years old, sitting in her daddy's lap, combing his hair. When she was thirteen, I bought her first Christmas present. We married when she was sixteen, the ninth day of August.

(He lays down his cards. Luck picks them up, examines them.)

LUCK

Royal Flush.

(All applaud, hand the cards back to Luck.)

FRED

I paid twenty-five cents for my charivaree.

LUCK

(Pulling out her phone)

Spell that for me.

WRITER

It's an old folk custom. People serenade the newlyweds with pots, spoons, pans, whatever they can find.

LUCK

Like this.

(She starts stomping with her foot and the others join in, tapping the spoon against the cup, thumping the table, etc., creating as much noise as possible.)

WRITER

Alright, alright. We get the picture.

AUSTRALIA
(to Elizabeth)

What did your husband do for a living?

ELIZABETH

Ellsworth? He was on all the government programs, chairman of all the programs. Studied livestock at Tulsa University. If he saw a cow, he could tell you how much it weighed or if it'd been loaded just before it came to town.

WRITER

Loaded?

ELIZABETH

With drinking water. He could calculate all that. Young as he was, not some old, fat, gray-headed man. No, young, slender. He did it all.

VANCE

(to Luck)

You remind me of my wife. She was a great hostess, great entertainer. Always the nicest person at whatever gathering there was. In Washington, she became friends with buddies of Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson. We were invited to a number of receptions in the White House. Once, when we were dancing, President Johnson cut in.

(Ballroom waltz music starts to play. Luck extends her hand to Vance and they get up and dance.)

ELIZABETH

When I was fourteen, they had a square dance at our house. They just come in and moved the furniture and got with it.

AUSTRALIA

I just loved to dance. Daddy wouldn't let me dance. My husband, when I married him, he wouldn't let me go to dances. I'd wait until he'd go to sleep and slip out. Me and my sister had the best time!

DELMAR

(Extending his hand to Australia)

Let's go.

(The waltz music shifts into jazz.)

DELMAR CONT.

My wife and I knew a lot of black musicians. When they'd come to town we'd always go see them. Ray Charles, Roy Fulton. I have a lot of their autographs.

(This is the first clue Australia is not completely clear-minded. She breaks away from Delmar. The music stops.)

AUSTRALIA

The minister that married my husband and me, he was in the Tulsa Race Riot. During the riots, W. G. Skelly boarded him and his family in houses. They weren't bothered 'cause they had family to take care of you.

(Delmar and the other characters look at each other, wondering where that came from. Then Delmar brings her back onstage and they resume dancing.)

ELIZABETH

(Extending her hand)

Fred?

FRED

You're looking at a one-woman man, Missy. I never trifled on my wife, not even one time when we was going together. She'd slap your face.

(Elizabeth sits back down. Luck, out of breath, comes downstage with Vance and the music stops.)

LUCK

That's how you live to be a hundred!

WRITER

No offense intended, but I have no desire to live to a hundred. I don't. You're all very good at it, obviously. But I wouldn't be.

ELIZABETH

How do you know?

WRITER

The ideal age for dying, as far as I'm concerned, is eighty-four, eighty-five.

LUCK

When you turn eighty-four, that'll change, believe me.

WRITER

I don't think we should always have to take what old age sends our way. We should have some choice in the matter.

FRED

Right to die? That what you talkin' about?

WRITER

Maybe.

VANCE

We've discussed that.

ELIZABETH

Some of us.

WRITER

And?

FRED

Made it this far. Figure I can stick it out from here.

DELMAR

Take my luck as it comes.

WRITER

But only because you have been lucky.

AUSTRALIA

Baby girl got married this year and she had Australia to come. She looked up, and she saw me, and she busted out crying. "This is the *happiest* day of my life," she said.

(Brief silence)

WRITER

(to the others, re Australia)

Some cards I just can't accept. You know what I mean?

VANCE

(to the Writer)

Want to know how I got to Washington? I joined the Newspaper Guild, a union, in Tulsa. The owner of the newspaper, Dick Lloyd Jones, fired a bunch of us who joined. Years later I met him in Washington. He said, "Vance, if I'd known you were going to win the Pulitzer, I wouldn't have fired you!" I said, "If you hadn't fired me I wouldn't have had the opportunity to win it." Worked seventeen years in the newspaper business in Port Arthur, Texas. Went to Houston, got managing editor. Then the National Bureau, Washington, D.C. We had twenty-seven papers from New York to San Francisco. On my own, I decided to look for stories I could do off the clock. Ran across a book by Raymond Clapper—

ELIZABETH

You mean, the same—

VANCE

Yup. The guy the award's named after. He'd written a book on nepotism thirty years before. Time to take another look, I thought. I found twenty percent of the members of Congress had relatives on their payroll and it was very suspect whether they were doing work or not. Got a pretty good story together in the *Washington Daily News*. Every day I'd get a new story, a new angle.

FRED

They must've hated you.

VANCE

A congresswoman from Georgia spent an hour and ten minutes on the floor of the House berating me.

LUCK

I would've loved to be a fly on that wall.

VANCE

Lyndon Johnson was majority leader of the Senate then. He felt the heat. Decided to open up the secret payroll records. Didn't fully open them up, but....there were some changes made.

WRITER

That's amazing. I could never have that kind of impact, even if I lived—

LUCK

To be a hundred?

(The Writer is silent)

VANCE

I've been awful lucky.

LUCK

Yes, you have.

WRITER

(to Elizabeth)

So you were a teacher?

ELIZABETH

That's right. My principal always said I had the best lesson plans. I learned some things about discipline, too. Don't make a lot of rules. Don't do anything you can't back up. And lower your voice—it sounds better to the kids.

AUSTRALIA

I did cosmetology. Had my own store, Tiny's, on Greenwood. Australia would've been too long a name. Cosmetology, you use those hard dyes. My husband said, "People are going to sue you." Then I worked at St. Francis. (beat) But you got to have those babies. When you have those babies, they don't save that job for you.

FRED

I started out delivering groceries for the University of Oklahoma. The butcher there asked, "What about letting Fred help me?" When we was on the farm I killed my own hogs. I cleaned them, I skinned them, I dressed them, Cured the meat. That's the way you lived back there. That's the reason I'm 102. Now then, I forgot where I was.

WRITER

The butcher shop.

FRED

Right. I ground two thousand pounds of hamburger meat every week. The football boys at OU, I cut every steak they ate. We had a grinder, meat grinder, had a seven-horsepower electric motor on it. You could grind fifty pounds in five minutes. I ground two thousand pounds without stopping. Worked there twenty years.

DELMAR

I got to work at seven thirty today.

WRITER

Wait a minute. You're still working?

DELMAR

I clean and detail trucks. Fast as I get one ready, they move it and bring up another one.

LUCK

Enough about work. Work's so boring.

WRITER

But that's one of the connections, don't you see? All these people work. If they're not working now, they were recently.

FRED

I've got a son-in-law said, "I'm sixty-five, I've done my work." Sat down on his butt. Wasn't no time until he had Alzheimer's disease.

ELIZABETH

After I retired, I belonged to the Business and Professional Women's Club. It's not kosher for a treasurer to be treasurer more than one year. I was treasurer about eleven. I gave the treasurer's report and one loud-mouthed woman piped up, "I'm not for locking in our money at 17 percent." Another one that was louder but probably had a more sense said, "I'm supporting Elizabeth. I think she knows best."

AUSTRALIA

I got some arthritis in my hands. But my mind is my own.

(Brief silence)

DELMAR

Nine months outta the year, I'm down at the racetrack. I go around sweeping up trash, tickets, spills, whatever. Every birthday a guy follows me with a tv. I go down to the Winners Circle, they announce my age and everything and my boss man gives me my present and tells people how old I am. One time, this lady showed up.

LUCK

(as the Lady)

You Delmar? Can I hug you?

DELMAR

Can you hug me? Help yourself.

LUCK

When I saw you on TV, I told my husband, I got to see that man. He still working at 103. I would've bought you something but I wouldn't know what to get you. So I got a card. I put a little something in it.

DELMAR

That's the way they do. They come in, and I'll be walking along, taking care of the track, not even thinking about it and somebody will touch me. I'll look around and they'll be handing me money.

FRED

Wish they'd do that for me. When my wife got sick, I said, "Momma, the only way we're ever going to save anything, now, let's take our social security check, put it in the bank, and forget what's in there." I started a garden. Sold \$4,000 one year out of my backyard garden, tomatoes and stuff. Washed them and cleaned them. Delivered to five different families free of charge.

VANCE

What was wrong with your wife?

FRED

She injured her spine, was completely paralyzed. Doctor told me, if you don't want her to have a sore, you turn her every two hours." Ever pick up somebody paralyzed? It's like picking up a log. Here I am, eighty-five. I turned my wife every two hours, day and night. Bought an old dodge van had a side-door. Push the wheelchair on it. Took her to the grocery store. All she could do was this.

(He demonstrates)

But her mind was sharp. She'd tell me what she wanted and I'd do it.

VANCE

Elzene died of cancer.

DELMAR

My wife got breast cancer. Forty-seven years we were together.

FRED

My wife died in 1996. I'm crazy, okay? We had the funeral and I'm left by myself. I go out and plow my garden.

(Vance, the Writer and Delmar use the bench as a casket. Carry it upstage.)

VANCE

I built a carillion for Elzene, a singing tower for her memorial. We saw one in Florida when we were driving around the country. I drew my plans, got everything in order—

ELIZABETH

Ellsworth and I went to the World's Fair in Seattle. Made a point of stopping every place we could, all the way there and back.

AUSTRALIA

There was this boy in my class came home with me, and he carried my books. My daddy say

LUCK

(as Daddy)

What are you doing with those books? Are those her books?

AUSTRALIA

Yeah.

LUCK

Well, give them to her and let her carry them herself. Is that what you go to school for, to learn to carry ladies' books?

AUSTRALIA

The boy never came back. He might've had a good chance.

ELIZABETH

I didn't know I was old till I was ninety. It sounds crazy, but I mean it. I quit driving in August last year. I could, but I just don't.

DELMAR

A young man out there on the job told me, he said, "Delmar, you know why you're living so long?" I said, "No, I have no idea." He said, "The Lord has got you here for a purpose." "What do you mean?" "You inspired me. When I heard about you, I had to see you. The reason you're living as long as you're here is because of what you did for me."

WRITER

Wait, I'm sorry. I just don't believe that. I mean, it's wonderful he can draw inspiration from your life, but he can't expect you to be his reason for living.

LUCK

You're not listening.

DELMAR

He said, "I wanna be like you. I wanna keep on living. That's what you've done around here. Everybody around you wants to be like you because you make them feel good about life."

(Elizabeth becomes a housekeeper, starts dusting, shaking a rug and typing. The other characters, except for Vance, Fred, Delmar and Australia, become attendants in a nursing home, miming various activities there and removing chairs in the process.)

VANCE

I get up about six forty-five, put coffee on. My housekeeper comes and fixes breakfast. I drink coffee, look at the news, use my stationary bicycle. Secretary takes care of the bills. She records books from the Library of Congress, puts them on a flash drive for me. I go to bed between nine o'clock and one o'clock. Sleep about an hour and a half at a stretch.

FRED

Place I'm at, I go to bed about nine thirty, ten o'clock. I push a button and a girl comes in. She'll turn the bed down for me, pull my pants off, pull the cover back. I'll get in bed and she'll cover me up. Course, I've got to have a urinal, and she'll hand me that. But I don't know when it's full

FRED CONT'D

'cause I can't see it. (beat) I've had them come, empty it, and walk right out. They don't have time to talk. They're taking care of me, right? But they don't have time to talk.

(The stage is now empty of chairs.)

AUSTRALIA

My granny was Indian. We couldn't call her grandmother. We'd have to say, "Nanny, Nanny." She could never tell nobody, those was her grandchildren. My auntie, my mother's sister, she took our grandma, *our* grandma, home with her to live. I never liked my auntie anymore after that. She took my Nanny.

DELMAR

I go to California every year, the last five years for dental work. Daughter-in-law pays for it. She bought seven shirts for me. Seven—how am I gonna wear seven shirts? She bought me work shoes and dress shoes. I got shoes I ain't even gonna wear. Got about fifteen pairs of boots, cowboy boots, because I love boots.

WRITER

What about death? Not one of you has mentioned death. Don't you ever think about dying?

(Ad lib responses, "Of course." "Yes," "All the time")

DELMAR

Everyone I know is gone, every woman I've known, every girl I've known, every friend I've ever had.

VANCE

Elzene is gone.

DELMAR

I got new friends now.

AUSTRALIA

I go to bed at night asking the Lord to help me over the pass, lead me around the bad places so I won't hurt myself. I say, "Search me, Lord, open my heart and let me in where I can be recognized that somebody tried to live part of the right life, if not all of it."

ELIZABETH

I'm sorry I didn't get to Alaska. Sorry I didn't make a trip to Mississippi to see my friend that I knew since 1941. (beat) What I'd really like is to cruise the Rhine River again. I enjoyed that!

DELMAR

An old man told me how to stay happy. He was sitting on the church step and he called me over. "Hey boy! Come over here. Are you happy?" I said, "I think so." "Do you want to be happy?" Yeah, I'd like to be happy. "I tell you what you do. You whistle or sing every day before noon and I guarantee you will have a good day.

LUCK

So, how about it?

WRITER

How about what?

LUCK

Let's take Delmar's advice. Do some singing.

WRITER

No, no, no.

ELIZABETH

I love singing.

AUSTRALIA

I can't hold a tune.

FRED

Me neither.

VANCE

I'm game. What'll we sing?

DELMAR

How 'bout Charley Pride? Whenever I chance to—

LUCK

No. Something lively. Something with a beat.

VANCE

I got it.

(He starts the song. The rest join in, singing, dancing and clapping)

People try to put us down.
Talking 'bout my generation.
Just because we get around.
Talking bout my generation.

ALL CONT'D

Things they do look awful cold.
Talkin' bout my generation.
Hope I die before I get old.
Talking 'bout my generation.
Why don't you all fade away
Talkin' bout my generation
And don't try to dig what we all say
Talkin' bout my generation
I'm not trying to cause a big sensation
Just talkin' about my generation.