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TODAY'S BABY IS TOMORROW'S 150-YEAR-OLD STUD

WASHINGTON -- The secret was passed to me by a movie producer, who heard it from a former Democratic candidate for vice president of the United States. You can see how it works around rush hours any day at Reagan National Airport if you stand near the gates of the shuttle flights to New York and Boston.

There is usually a small crowd, five or six people, 10 sometimes, lurking off to the side, casting furtive glances at the monitors over the ticket-takers. They are of a certain age, lawyers and such, some of them looking as rich as Rockefellers (maybe they are Rockefellers). Suddenly, soundlessly, they move as one, surrounding the ticket people.

Two things make the lurkers different from most of the passengers on the planes. They have passed their 62nd birthdays and they are flying for \$58.38 one-way. The normal fare is \$207.

Ah, the joys of seniorship! We are quietly taking over again. Those seniors at National can also fly across the country for \$167 any day they feel like it. Yes, there are restrictions -- the standing near the gate is necessary only at peak times in the morning and evening -- but they don't add up to much. The times they are a'changing, as the don't-trust-anyone-over-30 crowd of 30 years ago is fast becoming the 50-percent-off crowd. There are 118,000 senior discounts listed on a Web site called, appropriately, <http://www.seniordiscounts.com/>.

There are more than 60 million people over 55 in the United States now, and that number will top 75 million eight years from now. Do you know what that means?

I'm not sure, either. But here we come, and with us we're going to bring or continue mammoth changes in wealth distribution, politics, health care, entertainment, auto design, sex, lies and videotape. I am man, I am woman, hear me wheeze!

But wait, most geezers are not wheezers. The shuttle crowd looks in pretty good shape to me. This is extraordinary irony: not that baby boomers are getting older and still squealing for more, but that the biggest story of the 20th century -- the extension of lifespan -- may also be the biggest story of the new 21st century. In the United States in the year 1900, the average lifespan of a white male was 42 years. For a black male it was just 32 years. By 2000, that figure (for both races) was pushing 80 -- and women, as always, are living even longer.

It is true that those numbers were pushed up by a blessed decline in infant mortality. But part of the dramatic change we are living through is driven by the fact that "old" people, however the word is defined, are healthier than middle-aged people were for most of the last century. What we call modern medicine really began after World War II.

OK, but that kind of change can't happen again. Wrong! It is already happening -- and not only here. The Observer in London printed this statistic the other day: In Great Britain, where more than 10 million men and women are more than 65, men aged 60 can expect to live for another 19 years and women of that age can expect to live another 23 years. Because of that, the newspaper reported on a bet between two American gerontologists on the lifespan of children being born right now.

Dr. Jay Olshansky of the University of Illinois bet \$150 that some of these kids will live to be 130 years old. Steven Austad of the University of Idaho said no, some will live to be 150 years old. Since they won't know who wins -- unless things get really crazy -- the money will go to their heirs in the year 2150, when their \$300 will be worth \$50 million.

That bet is part of the problem. By then, \$50 million might not be enough. That same day, the director of Britain's National Association of Pension Funds issued a statement saying that a pension crisis was looming there because no one could earn enough money, at least in England, to pay for a good life if he or she lives to be 95 years old.

Not my problem. I'm going to the airport to fly to New York for a checkup, just to make sure I don't look or act my age.

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