

## **No Geezer Left Behind**

by Richard Wainright

Having cheated death and avoiding academic fraud, I graduated from Coastal Carolina University in December 2022. I graduated from high school in the class of 1970. If I'm doing the math right, that's fifty-two years between graduations. Even the mathematically challenged, like myself, will realize that I was a nontraditional student.

The path to my second graduation started in 2013. I was a sixty-year-old retired man living at Myrtle Beach, and I was bored. I had golf and fishing to fill my time. What I lacked was stimulating conversation. It was winter, or what passes for it on the Carolina coast, and I was spending way too much time alone, inside my way too comfortable condo, on the internet, on my way to becoming a reclining couch potato. There had certainly been no outlet for erudite exchanges on Facebook until I virtually "met" Joyce Barnes.

I was voicing my woes in a Facebook status update and Joyce, a friend of a friend, showed up and made a comment in the thread. She had been a lurker. She had "liked" some of my statuses and comments and had even graced my ramblings with an occasional happy face but had never made a comment or private messaged me before. Evidently, Joyce was also experiencing a dearth of stimulating convo, so she invited me to lunch.

Lunch was amazing. Joyce and I hit it off. That Joyce appreciated my sense of humor was my first clue that I may have found someone special. I don't have a filter and can affront people simply by being me. The darkness of my humor tends to range from shadowy to ecliptic and I am incapable of carrying on a conversation without being sarcastic. I like to laugh and often inappropriately. But I was also skeptical of my newfound friendship because as Groucho once said, "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member."

Joyce and I became fast friends with slow metabolisms, both being built for comfort. We went to the movies or out to dinner a couple of times a week, taking turns treating each other. It was the absolute best relationship I have ever had. Totally platonic, Joyce was the yin to my yang. Not even my curmudgeon shadow could eclipse her eternal sun.

Joyce was a professor at Coastal Carolina University. During one of our conversations, she told me about a program at Coastal that provides free tuition for senior citizens, aged sixty and over, I was at the magic age for inclusion. I was immediately excited at the prospect of an academic environment and potential conversation with someone other than my old beagle, Skooter.

The very next day I drove twelve miles to the campus and presented myself to the admissions office. I was given an application packet just like a real student. I was accepted almost immediately and was allowed to begin classes during the upcoming "Maymester."

I enrolled in an "Introduction to Creative Writing" course. I have always enjoyed writing but I have never had formal instruction. Nor had I received any honest appraisals on the quality of my compositions. Friends and family are poor sounding boards. Everything I write is the best thing they have ever read.

My instructor was William "call me Hastings" Hensel. The class was what is called an Experiential Course, and in this particular class, the experiential part was paddling a kayak on a series of trips on the Waccamaw River and writing pieces about the experience. I was both excited and scared shitless. Not because of any fear of water, I had grown up on the water. My fear was because I weighed about 320 pounds and hadn't done anything more physical than drive a golf cart in search of poorly directed golf balls and fishing those balls out of ponds.

I asked Hastings if there was a weight limit for a kayak. He verified that the capacity fell somewhere between me and Gilbert Grape's mom, but it could keep me buoyant. I discovered that he was not totally honest with me.

The day of my first "paddle" (that is what experienced kayakers call it) arrived. I love when a noun becomes a verb. I met the class at Riverfront Park in Conway. My classmates all looked like they could scull their perfect twenty-year-old bodies effortlessly

through the whitest of rapids. I selected a bright orange kayak (easier to see by search helicopters) and drug it to the launch area. It was the kayak with the highest weight limit. All the other students had blue kayaks. Hastings and the kayak guy wrangled me into the cockpit, which fit me like a Jell-O mold. Then Hastings handed me the little plastic bag of shit that I brought along containing: sunscreen, Chapstick, sandwich, energy bar, water bottle, and camera. He passed me the paddle and I was off. Well, not quite. It took several more hands to slide me down the hillside and into the river, as I was doing more plowing than sliding. I did not mention to the kayak master or Hastings that I had never paddled a kayak. I have been in a lot of boats but never one that was form-fitting. Turned out, I didn't have to tell them, they discovered it as soon as my bright orange kayak and all its contents entered the black, reptile-infested water of the Waccamaw.

Upon splashing into the water, I immediately made a series of uncontrolled weight shifts, spastic, ineffective paddling motions. After nearly swamping, eventually I coerced the kayak to move somewhat in the direction it was pointing, a welcome improvement over the side-to-side action that had threatened to become a barrel-roll at any time. My bright orange kayak, I am certain, though constructed for heavy duty, had never been so burdened, and if it could talk, it would use a lot of profanity.

I managed to hang my prized Fuji camera around my neck. With that simple motion resulting in another series of incontinent oscillations, I realized that I was never going to have the mastery of balance and the confidence to take my hands from the paddle long enough to retrieve and unzip the supply bag. Sadly, the sandwich would go uneaten, and my skin and lips would be at the mercy of the sun, shaded only by my Yankees cap. In a small test of my adroitness, I found that simply reaching for the bag sent the kayak out of control. The moment I wasn't fully focused on paddling, I either drifted into the bushes or into other kayaks.

With a little practice, I began to propel my craft successfully forward, or at least not simply in the direction of the tide. My confidence buoyed, I attempted to make a defensive maneuver that was above my sub-neophyte skill level. I found out later that my mistake was putting too much of the paddle in the water.

As in every catastrophe of my life, events occurred in slow motion, but also as in every other mishap, the slowing of time by my brain did not prevent the ultimate outcome.

As I started to roll, both the sky and my life flashed before my eyes. Suddenly the bright orange kayak was upside down and floating on top of me. And everything it contained was spit out, including me. Unceremoniously discharged just when I thought my lovely orange kayak and I were beginning to bond.

There is a frightening flushing sound in the ears when one is submerged that I don't know how to describe but I believe it is common to everyone. As I surfaced, I waited for the breathless shock that did not come. I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, and in my experiences in those more northern climes, May river water was glacial and raw and would cause immediate involuntary gasping and Costanza-like shrinkage. My first thought was how wonderfully warm and soothing the black water felt, followed closely by whether I had stayed in the kayak for the eight seconds required to earn a score.

My young float-mates became rodeo clowns, their sleek blue vessels drawing attention away from my upended orange tug, and policed up its dispersed contents: paddle, Yankees cap, and a floating bag of inaccessible and unnecessary shit. They uprighted my kayak and tossed all of my gear where I was supposed to be.

It was a unanimous decision that I would swim to shore and not further my embarrassment by attempting the impossible task of remounting my kayak as it floated. It had taken two people to get me into the cockpit on dry land. I am pretty sure that in open water it would take a Seal team.

I can swim but I had never tried to swim at 320 pounds. Michael Phelps would struggle to swim at over three bills. That is lazy river weight class.

So, they tugged my kayak back to where we came from for a restart. The only casualty of the episode was my favorite Fuji Camera that was still festooned around my neck. It was removed from my neck and taken to the beach to be resuscitated.

"Is it waterproof?"

"Nope."

I invented freestyle strokes trying to dog-paddle back to the launch, but in spite of my thrashing and splashing, I was getting no nearer to the bank. The tide was moving against me and about all my tired arms could do was hold my position and keep me from floating downriver and eventually joining the sea, fifty miles south. I was wearing my loaner life vest, which was probably designed to float a normal sized human, so only my

inherent buoyancy and treading water skills kept me afloat. Jeff, one of my young, fit, kayak companions, noticed my struggling and offered to tow me in. I gratefully grabbed on to an appropriately named grab handle and he dragged me in, like a wounded manatee.

As this hopeless sexagenarian finally made it back to dry land, I looked into faces that I could not read. Could have been schadenfreude I saw, could have been schreckenerregend.

Day one was an epic failure, but I had subsisted to paddle another day, with my newfound knowledge of how not to kayak.

With each successive trip onto the Waccamaw that month, I became more comfortable with the kayak and could relax a bit more, enjoy the amazing environment, and even take a few pictures with my new favorite Nikon camera, number three in my rotation of favorites when number Nikon number two joined the Fuji in the murky depths.

The river was very calming and exciting at the same time. I enjoyed the quiet serenity but also anticipated what I might discover around the next bend or at the mouth of the next creek. I enjoyed paddling off on my own to challenge myself to spot snakes and other river-dwelling creatures on the riverbank before they were pointed out and sometimes captured by the guide, Paul, the poor man's Steve Irwin. He offered us all opportunities to hold snakes that he had pulled off of a bush. I never acquiesced. He assured us that they were harmless. I once watched a harmless snake bite Steve Irwin in the face.

One concern was that, though I had learned to stay afloat for the rest of the month, I could not paddle my fat ass fast enough to keep up with the group and sometimes they would float out of sight. That was not worrisome, as they had to pass my location on the way back to that day's launch/recovery area. As I became separated from the flotilla, the thought of what I should do in this landless region, if I should overturn my kayak again, get caught up in the tide and have to abandon ship, or hit a widow-maker, was not a comforting one.

Hastings gave me a whistle to wear around my neck, which I would be too embarrassed to blow and signal my inadequacy. I never felt more geezerly. Knowing I

could never successfully climb back onto my kayak, if dislodged, my plan was to paddle or swim to shore and try to find solid ground between the snake-infested, thorny brambles and cypress knees. I knew that eventually the class would return and see my bright orange kayak wedged into the bushes like a runway beacon or misplaced construction cone and search for the corpulent kayaker lodged between two types of quagmires. I was also certain that as soon as the class flotilla was out of sight the laughter was uproarious.

I survived the class, but the experience was an "aha" moment for me. Accustomed to the comfort I felt with Joyce, my fellow slow metabolic friend, and although my blue-kayak compatriots never said anything about my weight, I was embarrassed that I had deteriorated so completely. Decades ago, I was one of these fit, wrinkle-free youths. Part of the benefit of being a student at Coastal Carolina is free access to the finest fitness center in the county. I immediately began a daily workout regimen while paying attention to my diet. I read the nutrition facts and was disappointed that the portion size for bacon is not a pound. I hired a personal trainer. I had three in all because they kept graduating. This morning I weighed 247.4. My status has been downgraded from morbidly obese to just obese.

I learned from Hastings that I was not as good of a writer as my friends thought I was but not as bad I thought I was. This class encouraged me to take every creative writing course that is offered at CCU. Just as I was inspired to improve my health through the self-loathing that came from a dozen, fit twenty-year-olds circling me like sharks in their perfectly paddled kayaks, I was enthused to develop my writing skills.

I am often amazed by the way that seemingly unconnected events transpire that combine to totally change the course of my life. I am convinced that the chain of happenings that began with a simple discussion with a friend probably saved or extended my life; at the very least, enhanced it.

You might question why it took me ten years to complete a four-year degree. The "No Geezer Left Behind" program only allowed me to take two classes per semester for free. Even a numerically impaired English major knows that those credits do not add up very quickly. Particularly when I did not even declare a major until after year eight.

In December, when I graduated, I did not walk because I didn't have a single person to whom I could give one of my six allotted tickets. My friend, Joyce had died peacefully in her sleep in 2016.

An old man graduating from anything is not the attraction you might expect. Joyce would have come, though. She would have cheered when they called my name, even though they ask to hold your applause until the end. That was not her style.



**Richard (Rick) Wainright** is a retired disabled veteran residing in Myrtle Beach, SC. He graduated, magna cum laude, with a degree in English, from Coastal Carolina University in 2022 at the age of seventy. Rick grew up in northern Idaho and spent twenty years in the Air Force fighting the cold war. He has three children, three grandchildren, and two narcissistic tabby cats. His hobbies are photography and creative writing.