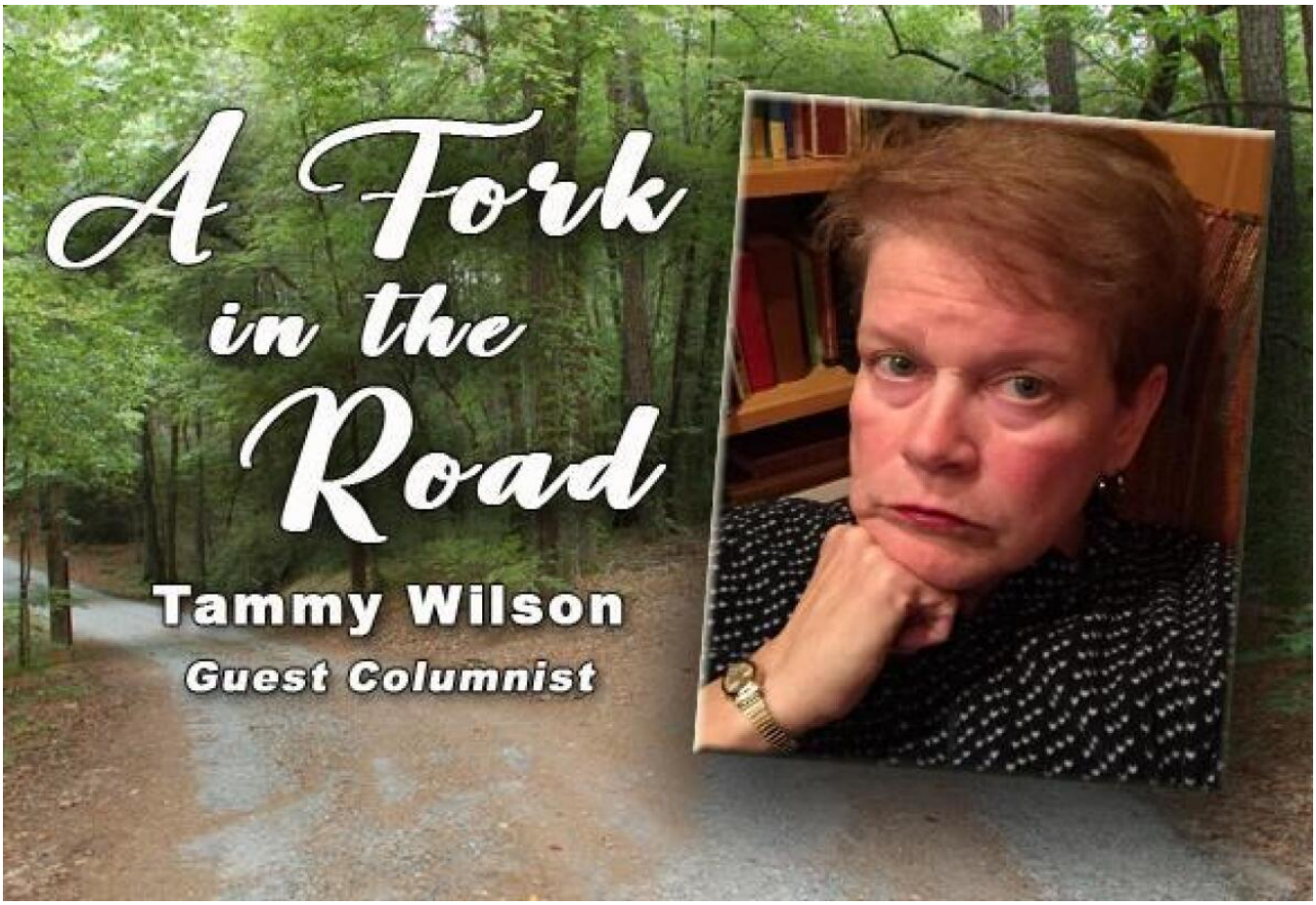


In The Wake Of Helene

Tammy Wilson

I never lost power during Hurricane Helene.

When friends and family called me about the hurricane, I had to tell them I was extremely lucky.

The storm was bad. A lot of North Carolinians lost family and friends, their home, their cherished belongings, their pets. Some saw their real estate literally washed away.

But I can't claim any of those stories.

I've tried to imagine the terror of seeing a wall of water crashing toward me, sweeping away my home and neighbors, pets, virtually everything I own.

Being a near miss—or even a far miss-- leaves its mark. Last week a Facebooker from Louisiana said she understood. She lived through Katrina, and could relate to the relief of being spared, but, at the same time, the overwhelming feeling of anxiety, numbness and profound sadness.

That's how it is with trauma. It takes different forms, and in one way or another, we've all been traumatized being so close to destruction. In the end, I don't know why we were spared and why the folks west of here were not.

Perhaps TV's *Mister Rogers* responded best when he explained disasters in a way kids could understand. When there are scary things in the news, he said, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

In the wake of Helene, ordinary people dropped everything to come to North Carolina's rescue. Men and women,

young and old, helped turn Hickory into a hub of hope. Private pilots, many of them ex-military, arrived with their helicopters to make air drops to hard-hit areas. Community members rallied to organize places to bring necessary supplies and cash to support the effort.

On my way to the collection point in the parking lot of Appalachian State University in Hickory, I found myself behind a horse trailer and a flatbed. On the flatbed was a generator and power tools. In the trailer were case of bottled water, packages of diapers, toilet paper and more. Obviously, he was on a relief mission. Had I not been caught by a traffic light I would have given the driver a thumbs up.

Surely Helene will be one of those calamities by which we mark time.

Two days after Helene's wretched visit, I opened my t-shirt drawer to see, neatly folded, my shirt from Lake Lure. I remember the day I bought it. Cousin Renee was visiting from Illinois and wanted to see where *The Last of the Mohicans* was filmed. She's a Daniel Day Lewis fan and wanted to tour the famous waterfall.

We enjoyed a sandwich lunch, poked around the Lake Lure Inn and browsed the gift shop.

Later, we took the boat ride of the lake with its narration of how the lake was formed in Hickory Nut Gorge into a place where "summer" is a verb. The Morse family who founded Carolina Mountain Power Company, paid to build a dam on the Broad River to create the lake back in 1927.

Our boat captain indulged us in movie lore, too, including spots used to shoot *Dirty Dancing*, the film that made stars of Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey. We drifted past "Firefly Cove" and the stone steps where Jennifer Grey practiced her dance steps in cutoff shorts.

It's not that I have spent that much time at Lake Lure, but I've made enough visits to envy those who have. Its cottagey surroundings, stunning views and laid-back ambiance. It was a place lost in time. a poignant reminder of a time and place that's been erased.

Lake Lure sprouted up as a tourist attraction with a striped awning vibe. The affluent built lakeside cottages with screened porches and walls of windows. They pondered the looking glass water and lore about the outline of the mountain ridge that looks like a sleeping lady.

My first-ever visit to Lake Lure was about 30 years ago, when I attended a conference at the Inn. I remember imagining how the hotel would have appeared during the Gatsby era. In fact, Gatsby's creator, F. Scott Fitzerald and wife Zelda stayed there back in the day.

A recent attraction was the Flowering Bridge. When it became known that the state would decommission the 1925 bridge, a group of citizens with green thumbs urged the structure to be saved and used as a garden space. They called it the Flowing Bridge. They say it attracted as many as 18,000 visitors a year.

Two years ago, the garden was expanded for pet owners and their furry friends to snatch a chewable from the "Doggie Stick Library" and enjoy a drink of water. Pet owners, wracked in grief, would visit the Rainbow Bridge and pay tribute to departed pets, placing collars on the bannisters. People came from far and wide to memorialize pets that had passed on.

No one could imagine that a monster storm could churn its way northward and demolish the Flower Bridge, much less Lake Lure itself.

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