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## The "Cancer Plus One" Edition

*Warning: Organ Recital Ahead.*

*If other people's health bores the crap out of you (and I don't blame you), stop reading now.*

### **Hopping Back on the Breast Cancer Escalator**

A while ago I shared my skepticism about the [breast cancer escalator](#): the notorious problem of overdiagnosis of breast cancer and especially *ductal carcinoma in situ*. There's ongoing debate in the medical community about what to do when a calcified line is seen on mammography. Many calcifications in milk ducts do not contain cancer cells, and many that do contain cancer cells never progress past that container. In fact, most cases of *ductal carcinoma in situ* are discovered on autopsies of women who died of unrelated causes. Several ongoing clinical studies take a watchful waiting approach, similar to what is now standard procedure for prostate cancer. So when my mammogram showed a calcification seven months ago, I decided to decline the offer of an immediate biopsy and run my own little watchful waiting study, with a repeat mammogram in six months.

One month ago a follow-up mammogram showed my calcification had doubled in size. Watchful waiting was over.

The radiologist came into the mammography room where I sat in a gown. She sat down and commented on my can of sparkling water. So refreshing.

*Oh please, I thought, get on with it.*

"Your mammogram shows a change in the calcified area."

I interrupted her. "Let me see the comparative slides."

"Oh. I suppose we could pull them up here." She went to a small computer screen and shuffled through until she could show them side by side. "The calcification is twice the length of six months ago."

As soon as I saw those very different views from six months apart I was pretty sure I had cancer. It was time for a biopsy.

### **Biopsy Day**

When the biopsy nurse wrote "Yes" on the wrong breast, meaning "jab this one," my lack of trust in American medical care was confirmed yet again. Soon that "Yes" was erased and then written on the correct side.

I lay face down on a table with a hole in it for my breast and a mammogram machine underneath. The radiologist was in the room, but a resident - not the radiologist - squatted beneath the table, thick needle in hand.

They gave me lidocaine (not enough) and punched a hole.

"Fucking son of a bitch," I yelled.

"She's experiencing some discomfort," said the nurse.

They kept asking me if I wanted them to stop. I kept asking if they were done. All told, they took seven samples.

Afterward they said I needed to take it easy the rest of the day. No lifting for 48 hours. In a moment of bravado I asked the nurse, "How long until I can have sex?"

"You could do it tonight." She winked. "You still have one good breast. Use that one."

Didn't feel like it, though. Collapsed when I got home.

Four days later I got the phone call. Stage zero cancer, *ductal carcinoma in situ*, or DCIS. The pathology report was terse; I still don't know how rapidly those cells are dividing. But other markers of cancer were there, including dead cells in the center of the malignancy that are thought to [contribute to metastasis](#). Although I expected this result, I was dazed the rest of the day. By the next day I was with it enough to read some relevant medical journal articles and then watch the presidential debate. The following morning I woke up with this weird thought: "I'm more concerned about Biden's performance than I am about breast cancer."

That reaction may brand me as a political junkie, but it was enough to jolt me out of the funk into which I had fallen when I got the phone call. The presidential election is a big problem to solve; my cancer is a smaller one.

A DCIS is considered a Stage 0 cancer, but mine is Grade 3, meaning the cells are reproducing relatively rapidly and there is necrosis (dead cells in the center). So there was good news and not-great news, all wrapped up in a very short pathology report. After the presidential debate I regained the focus I'd lost at diagnosis and got to work figuring out next steps.

The following week I met with the breast cancer surgeon. She explained the lumpectomy process. Knowing the current paradigm about women over 65 on HRT, I expected pushback on continuing with HRT after breast cancer. Sure enough, the surgeon said, "Estrogen feeds breast cancer." I had brought along my trusty copy of Dr. Avrum Bluming's [review article](#) documenting the benefits of HRT for cardiac and bone health, and the lack of data to support stopping HRT for women with breast cancer. I also pointed out that my atrial fibrillation (AFIB) started when I was [briefly taken off HRT](#). The surgeon said she would refer me to an expert I could consult with, after the surgery, to discuss continuing HRT. Now, that will be an interesting conversation.

### **The Plus One**

And speaking of AFIB, mine has progressed this year to the point where a cardiac ablation is a good idea. Three months ago a light workout put me in the hospital and my cardiologist banned me from the gym. The breast cancer surgeon and I both thought it best to do the ablation first, to lower the chances of a cardiac event during surgery. And so off to the ablation people.

The ablation people pointed out that I will need to be on a blood thinner for two months after that procedure, which makes surgery a bad idea. So back to the breast cancer people. It was a bit like the old [Gaston and Alphonse cartoon](#), except that one of the surgeons is a woman.

And voila--a surgery date in August. Meanwhile my next book launches at the end of August. Not even two weeks between surgery and launch day. All of a sudden I'm rushing to clean up the last few details in the manuscript (thank you, Beta readers and proofreaders!), plus set up a publicity campaign that can run automatically while I'm recovering from surgery.

And if you want to learn how to do an automated book launch, Gentle Reader, you'll find it all in my new book, [Write & Sell a Well-Seasoned Romance](#) -- available for pre-order now.

This has been a Stella organ recital. And I promise not to inflict another upon you for a good long time.



Please keep the pen moving (or the keys clicking) and keep thinking about getting your words in front of readers.

All the best,

Stella,

[stella@stellafosse.com](mailto:stella@stellafosse.com)

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**Please Share this Newsletter!**



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**From the blog this month**



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## Welcome to Amsterdam

**Stella Fosse**

In the early years of raising my son who has cerebral palsy, I subscribed to a magazine for parents of children with disabilities. The magazine was full of information about dealing with schools and physicians, and the tone was resolutely upbeat. One particular article stands out in my memory, four decades later. Can't find it but here is the gist:

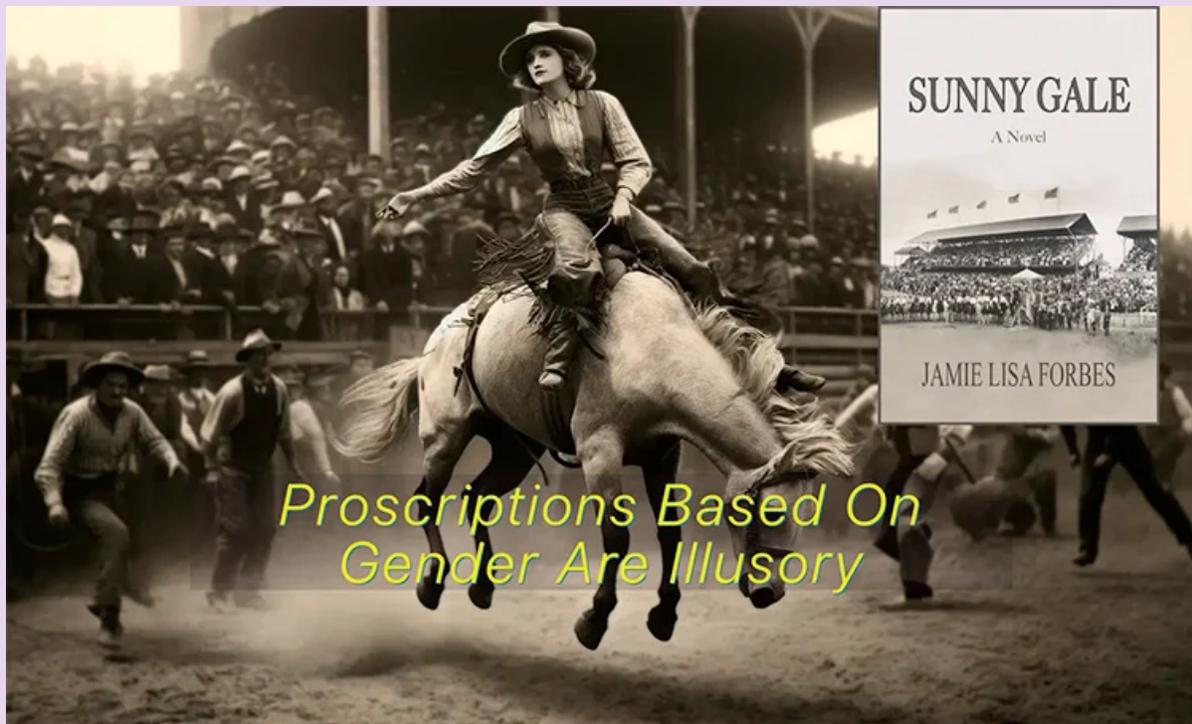
*Imagine you're on your way to a vacation in Paris. You're excited. You pack your bags and your passport, and your flight goes smoothly. But when you land you realize you're not in Paris. You've arrived in Amsterdam, and that is where you'll spend your vacation. It's not a bad place; there is plenty to see and learn. It's just different than what you expected. And if you spend your time wishing you were in Paris, you'll miss out on everything Amsterdam has to offer.*

That framing meant a lot to me back in the 1980s, as I strove to maintain a positive attitude about the challenges our family faced. And recently that framing became relevant again, but with a twist.

You see, I just had my Paris vacation. My sixties were better than I could have imagined. I literally went to Paris, for the first time in my life. I dated men and women, was polyamorous for a while, and wrote Elderotica with my friends. I blogged, I wrote essays for publications. I waved goodbye to corporate life and became a novelist. I also became a grandmother. I took up weight lifting, swam, danced, and had more energy than I did in my forties. I actually learned to cook. I kissed a lot of frogs and met my Prince. We bought a five bedroom house on two acres and I had no trouble keeping up with the gardening.

That was [Paris](#): My sixties. What a trip!

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## Proscriptions Based on Gender are Illusory

**Jamie Lisa Forbes**

This spring, my historical novel, [Sunny Gale](#), was published by Pronghorn Press. *Sunny Gale* is a fictionalization of the era of women's professional rodeo from roughly 1895 to the early 1930's. My own journey to this era and back expanded my [notion of womanhood](#) way beyond what I would have [imagined possible](#) as I turn sixty-nine.

I grew up on a ranch on the Little Laramie River, some thirty miles west of Laramie, Wyoming. Growing up as I did, we encountered few people other than immediate family. I can remember the excitement I would feel on a family trip to “town” when we rose up out of the valley to the plains and saw the lights of Laramie beckoning ahead.

My father’s parents lived in a stone mansion and, if we were going to town, it was to spend time with them. The mansion was huge, a great place to explore, to hide and play in. If we spent the night, I slept in the “girls’ room” where my aunts used to sleep. On the walls hung two large portraits of my aunts when they were Laramie Jubilee Days’ Queens. Laramie Jubilee Days was our rodeo week. I grew up in the heartland of rodeos and there were always queens at the rodeo.

A rodeo parade, by its nature, included a queen, her ladies-in-waiting and visiting rodeo queens from other towns. Right after our Jubilee Days came Cheyenne Frontier Days with its own parade, rodeos—and queens. If it rained that week and we couldn’t put up hay at the ranch, we got to attend Frontier Days.

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