

With sure fingers, professional fingers, she examined my neck, behind my ears, under my jawbone.

Apparently nothing unusual. At least there was nothing in her manner to indicate there might be.

Then my eyes, inside my nostrils and mouth, my throat and the inner side of my lips, using a lighted scope.

A few notes on the case record. Back to me. "Clasp your hands behind your head please, lean forward," she requested. Then she was examining my breasts, then under my armpits. Her fingers slowed in their probing. She was carefully palpating the area under my right arm. "This is it," I told myself, while my stomach zoomed down to my stockinged toes. "I've got it."

"Excuse me," she said calmly. "I want Dr. L to look at this." . . .

A figure briskly stepped through the curtains into the examining room, with my doctor at her side.

"Dr. G is always finding things in the armpit," she remarked cheerily. I licked my dry lips and returned a wan smile.

Then she too pressed her fingers gently but firmly over the area. "You do have a very small palpable mass there, but from its position and in view of your history, it does not indicate any malignance," she announced when she had completed her examination.

"Every two months or so, check it. If it should show any change, have your doctor look at it.

"I see by your chart you had a benign [tumor] removed from the left side in 1948. This is in just about the same position on the opposite side.

"Such masses often occur in women your age. They represent natural fibrocystic changes that come with advancing years. Usually they are benign. But they should be watched."

Her words brought deep relief, but did she have to mention "advancing years?"

She smiled and left the booth. The examination continued. "Please remove your shoes and stockings."

I did, and Dr. G went carefully over the soles of my feet. Certain rare but deadly forms of cancer begin in such widely separated places of the anatomy as the bottoms of the feet and the eyeballs. "We take no chances," said Dr. G.

A Papanicolaou smear and an iodine stain test to spot cervical or uterine cancer came next; completely painless, except for a slight sting from the iodine. All over now but the proctoscopy [examination of the lining of the colon and rectum with a special instrument].



A digital examination can be counted on to detect a fairly high percentage of rectal cancers, but once a person reaches the high incidence years (over 40), more effective measures are required if early detection is to be achieved. Tiny lesions and polyps that may give advance warning of cancer can only be seen during proctosigmoidoscopy. They cannot be felt in the very early stages when chances of cure are best.

In less time than it took to write this description, my examination was over.

"Nothing to it," I can truthfully say. I could hardly describe it as uncomfortable.

"That's it," I heard Dr. G saying. "You may get dressed now. Before you leave please go to the X-ray room for a chest X ray. Dr. D will be waiting for you in his office when you've finished."

So far, I was sure I'd made a pretty good score. All of the pamphlets I'd read said they'd be doing biopsies or holding consultations if anything suspicious had turned up. I was feeling much relieved but not entirely convinced.

In the X-ray department I was given a metal numbering tag. It was like lining up in the bakery on Saturday morning. I was number 13. "Good thing I'm not superstitious," I thought. . . .

In about five minutes my name was called. I walked into a small windowless room. "Take off your jacket and step over here," the pretty technician directed, at the same time reaching out for my case record and the numbered tag.

"Lean forward, and put your chin here. Breathe deeply. Hold your breath when I say hold. Breathe . . . hold. Breathe . . . hold, that's all. Thank you."

The examination was over. I'd gone through the mill. Dr. D's office and the answers were just down the hall. . . .

"I've got good news. You've nothing to worry about. We'll have the reports on the cytological tests in a few days. But from what we've seen so far, you can be pretty sure you don't have cancer." (This was confirmed a week later.)

At the reception desk I checked out and picked up an appointment card for next year.

It was five minutes past 12 by the lobby clock. I'd registered at 9:15.

I walked out into the February afternoon. . . . The raw wind from the East River caught my breath. The sky was gray. There were snow flurries in the air, but for me it was spring, and the sun was shining.

