

Opinion: The woman's heart attack

By Martha Weinman Lear, New York Times

In medical circles, they call it the Hollywood Heart Attack. You've seen it: grimace of agony, clutching of chest, sudden collapse, the whole purple-prose panoply.

For my husband, Harold Lear, a doctor who became a patient just that suddenly, it was the first stop in a five-year medical odyssey, one cardiac crisis after another, ending with the ultimate stop in 1978.

Through all the years that followed, it remained my assumption that the Hollywood Heart Attack was it: the paradigm, the norm, the way heart attacks are supposed to happen.

I was relieved of this assumption two years ago, when I had one of my own.

Mine went like this: altogether well one moment, vaguely unwell the next; fluttery sensation at the sternum, rising into the throat; mild chest pressure; then chills, sudden nausea, vomiting, some diarrhea. No high drama, just a mixed bag of somethings that added up to nothing you could name. Maybe flu, maybe a bad mussel, maybe too much wine, but the chest pressure caused me to say to my second husband, "Could this be a heart attack?" "Of course not," he said. "It's a stomach bug."

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