

The Diagnosis

A Short Story by John W. Allie

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I heard the back door open and close, followed by the sound of Margot's feet stomping snow off onto the welcome mat.

"Hi honey," I called out to her from the living room.

She entered, smiling at me sadly while she unbuttoned her long wine-colored coat.

"How was your doctor's appointment?" I asked.

"Andrew," she said. "I need to tell you something."

I froze, feeling the fingers of my hand tighten on the arm of the chair. "What is it?"

She sat down in the chair across the room, looking down at her feet and crushing the carpet with her toes. "I've been diagnosed with a rare disease. Françoise-Barr Syndrome."

"What?" I exclaimed, aghast. Then, hesitating, "What's Françoise-Barr Syndrome?"

Margot sighed and continued grinding the carpet with her feet. "Thankfully, nothing life-threatening. The doctor said I could live with it my entire life without serious harm. Here, he gave me a pamphlet."

She dug in her purse and pulled out a small two-color booklet. On the cover was a stipple-shaded drawing of a smiling woman accompanied by the words "Living With Your Françoise-Barr Syndrome." I took it from her and flipped through it nervously.

"Huh," I remarked. "It was discovered only last year."

"The doctor said it's turning out to be more common than the original estimates led them to expect."

"Symptoms include headaches, occasional sleeplessness, sensitivity to bright light and loud noises, and elevated discomfort in extreme temperatures," I read from beneath a picture of a man and a woman drinking wine together.

"I describes me perfectly," Margot said sadly. "I've experienced all of those lately. Even the sleeplessness."

"Yes, I remember," I said. "Two nights ago, you didn't get to

sleep until almost 1:00."

"Exactly," she said. "I told Dr. Holden about it. He asked me how I'd been feeling, and I said, 'Mostly fine, but I've had some headaches and the other night I couldn't sleep.' The next thing I knew he was telling me about Françoise-Barr Syndrome. I wasn't expecting to be diagnosed with some weird disease. . . it was just a routine physical!"

I scratched my head. "I guess it happens from time to time. It's one of those things you expect to happen to someone else."

"I know, I know," Margot said, picking up her coat and carrying it to the closet. "Then it happens to you, and it's. . ." she trailed off, wringing her hands bitterly.

"It must be hard," I said, with as much empathy as I could muster. I put an arm around her waist and she rested her head on my shoulder. "What do we do about it?" I asked.

"It's easy to take care of," Margot said. "I need to make sure I get enough Vitamin C in my diet, plus a probiotic supplement. Beyond that, I need to ensure I get a healthy vegetable intake and avoid too much red meat. And Dr. Holden gave me a prescription for a pill that's supposed to lessen the symptoms a bit."

"What drug?" I asked.

"I forget the name," she said. "They faxed the prescription to the pharmacy. I'll pick it up tomorrow."

I sighed. "All right. Vegetables. I think we still have the leftover Chinese stir-fry in the refrigerator. I could heat it up in a skillet. I bet it'd taste almost fresh. Sound good?"

"Sounds perfect," she said.

I turned up the burner and tossed the mushy little shreds of vegetable into a heavy iron skillet. They ricocheted back and forth in the pan as I shook it, moving so smoothly they appeared to be denying multiple laws of physics. Once they appeared to be getting hot I dumped them onto a plate and went to the table.

"All ready," I announced. "Better than new."

"Oh good," Margot cried. I scraped a hefty portion onto her plate and sat down opposite her at the table.

“It's not as good as it was the first time,” I observed after I began eating.

“Oh, pooh,” Margot scoffed. “It's just fine. Healthy, too.”

“I suppose,” I said sourly, downing another mouthful.

“It's fine,” Margot insisted. “It was the perfect thing for tonight, cooking up a vegetable dish on such short notice. It's as if you'd planned it ahead of time.”

“We already don't eat much meat,” I reminded her. “it wreaks havoc with my cholesterol, remember?”

Margot looked thoughtful. “Yes, that's right,” she said. “I guess I've gotten so used to life without it that I stopped thinking about it.”

The next morning I was looking for a clean glass when Margot came in, tying the sash on her bathrobe as she entered.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Morning,” she said groggily, heading toward the refrigerator to get a yogurt.

I was standing on the seat of a chair and balanced on the tips of my toes as I peered into the dark corners. I was in the cabinet up to my elbows when I felt that sickening feeling of a bowl sliding along my arm as it attempted escape. I reacted too late. It was one of those steel bowls, and it dropped straight down to the counter, bounced off with a loud report like an injured bell and fell to the floor with a warbling ring.

I jumped to the floor and snatched it up before it could make any more noise. “I'm so sorry,” I said quickly to Margot.

She glanced up from her breakfast, startled. “Sorry about what?”

I frowned and put the bowl back into the cabinet.

That night Margot went to bed early and I could hear her deep breathing as she slumbered. I crept into the study and sat down at the computer. I checked my email, then clicked the “Back” button until it displayed the Google frontpage. Typing as softly as I could, I entered

“Françoise-Barr Syndrome” into the search box and clicked the button.

The search returned the twin of Margot's original pamphlet, along with the names of the doctors who discovered it and a brief news bulletin regarding the approval of a specialty drug, Barrexil. There were no medical bulletins, no scientific documentation of any kind. Frowning, I shut down the computer and went to bed.

After she'd taken Barrexil for a week, Margot looked the happiest she'd been since the diagnosis.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her one evening.

“Wonderful,” she breathed. “Wonderful.”

“That's good,” I said, smiling. “I was a little skeptical of that drug at first—the active ingredient is Acetaminophen.”

“So?”

“That's just Tylenol.”

Margot shrugged. “So what? It seems to work.”

“Sure, it's not a problem,” I said. “I just thought that was kind of strange.”

“I guess it is, a little,” Margot conceded. “But it does work. I haven't had a headache all week. I've been sleeping fine. After living with Françoise-Barr for so long, it's a relief to finally get a break from the symptoms.”

I put the last few dishes into the dishwasher and slid it shut. It began muttering to itself. I went over and kissed her on the cheek. “I'm just glad you're better.”