

"O D E T T E"

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## "ODETTE"

Because of severe pain in my foot and ankle, I recently sought help from the U.C.L.A., Medical Center in Los Angeles. My doctors decided to hospitalize me to receive the prescribed treatment. I was escorted to the room I would occupy, was settled in bed, then drew back the curtain and surveyed what would be my 'home' for the next two weeks. It simply didn't look like a hospital room! Perched on the long windowsill were ten beautiful, dainty and colorful artificial flower arrangements! About three feet of one end of the windowsill housed a group of handsomely bound volumes, standing straight and tall! Draped over a chair-back was a lovely, multi-colored shawl, obviously still in the making! And then my roving eyes discovered a small 'mound' in the center of my neighboring bed, and on the pillow, emerging from the 'mound' were tufts of glossy, black, short hair. A few minutes passed, the 'mound' moved and its occupant slid to the floor and walked (or floated') with short, rapid steps, across the room to my bedside. The tiny figure was that of a young oriental woman, perhaps four feet ten inches tall, weighing about ninety pounds.

I'll never, as long as I live, forget the vision that stood beside me. The entire left side of her head was heavily swathed in bandages, from the top of her head to her chest. Exposed in part was a large, flesh-colored tube, about one inch in diameter, which extended from her chest to her left temple. (I was later to learn exactly what this 'tube' was, its structure and its use.) Visible were both eyes, a small nose and mouth, and the right side of her face and head. With bubbling enthusiasm she greeted me. (Because of her accent, I was certain she was a relatively newcomer to the United States. Each word was spoken very slowly, and, obviously, required real effort and concentration). Her greeting was - "OH! I'm so glad you have come! I am Odette David. I have been so lonesome! What is your name?"

I informed Odette my name was Muriel Sirevaag and that I was very happy to meet her and share this room with her. Odette tried valiantly to pronounce my name, but it emerged 'Mur-lee-elle', and from that time forth, it remained 'Mur-ee-elle'!

Odette's eagerness was captivating. Her happy disposition and personality just 'glowed'.

It has always been my belief that when God 'put me down', He had a reason, and now I am absolutely certain of this, for in no other way could I ever have had the delightful experience of knowing Odette.

As the days passed, I met Odette's devoted husband, Jesse, her two darling little sons, relatives and friends. She shared each one of them with me, and bit by bit, the amazing story of this courageous little mother unfolded. She was truly incredible - unbelievable! It was just impossible to find appropriate adjectives to describe her.

Most of us at one time or another experience illness and pain. Odette's story helped me minimize mine. And perhaps there are those who find themselves in similar circumstances, facing a dreadful disease such as cancer. Perhaps the story of how Odette's 'hopeless' condition was reversed through her absolute determination, her complete faith in God and the untiring efforts of her doctors at U.C.L.A., will encourage and inspire them to accept these circumstances, defy them, and emerge victorious! I'm certain her story will touch and benefit everyone, and it may even result in many 'miracles'! This is my prayer and hope.

#### ODETTE'S STORY

On April 10, 1945, in Bangued Abra, Philippines, Odette Melendez was born into the well-known "Villamor Clan", a family of high intellect but modest means.

From early childhood, Odette displayed artistic ability, love for flowers - anything and everything that was colorful and beautiful. A happy, carefree little girl, she, at an early age, naturally gravitated into mastering the graceful, lovely traditional oriental dances of the Philippines. In her teens, she taught dancing. (Just wish I could share with you the pictures I have seen showing these lovely girls in their colorful costumes!) In fact, Odette's fame for her beautiful dancing spread far and wide and she was requested from time to time to dance for dignitaries visiting her country.



When Odette was sixteen, she became acquainted with Jesse David, a school-mate, who was destined to become her husband. At the age of twenty, she was employed by the Social Security System as a Key Punch Operator. By this time, Odette and Jesse had discovered their deep love for each other, and were planning to be married in five or six years. The long wait would be necessary because their families were of modest means and they planned to work and save money to pay for their own wedding.

In 1969, Odette, an extremely beautiful, talented young woman, twenty-five years of age, became the lovely bride of Jesse David. They were married in Quezon City, Philippines--and there never was a more beautiful or perfect wedding. Odette, with the help of some very close friends, had created her exquisite, beautifully beaded wedding gown. Many guests were present - and Odette's happiness was almost complete. There was just one slight, ominous cloud in her life. For some time, she had been aware of a growth developing on her left temple. (How could she possibly know this was the forerunner of a physical and mental nightmare beyond description?)

David was now in the U. S. Navy, and in July, 1970, he was transferred to Jacksonville, Florida. Leaving the Philippines for the United States was exciting, but even more exciting was the fact that beneath Odette's heart, a new little heart was beating. But the cloud hovered! The growth on her temple was spreading. Odette dressed her hair in a style that completely obliterated the growth, and she was able to keep her secret from Jesse.

In January, 1971, Jesse was transferred to Ft. Huenueme, California. Here, on February 21, 1971, little Eric was born. Odette and Jesse experienced a happiness that was sublime! And as yet, only Odette was aware of her mysterious problem, and she still stubbornly refused to share the problem with Jesse, knowing the worry and concern it would cause him.

The little family of three seemed so ideal - so complete now. Then Odette became aware of some unexplainable force making her feel it was necessary to bear another child--as soon as possible! Her second little son was on the way when, finally, the swelling in her cheek became so obvious that she could no longer conceal her affliction.



Jesse was shocked and alarmed beyond words. Somehow he felt Odette's condition was much more serious than she suspected. He insisted she see a doctor immediately, but she was adamant in her refusal to seek medical help, promising to take care of the problem as soon as the baby arrived.

On February 21, 1972, exactly one year after Eric's birth, Daryl joined the little family. Their joy and happiness now was complete--except for that black, ominous cloud that persisted.

Odette's condition worsened. In May of 1973, Jesse finally convinced Odette that she must seek medical help, and U.C.L.A., Medical Center was their selection.

The entire left side of Odette's face was now involved. She still maintained a happy, optimistic disposition and tried her best to minimize the pain. Examination and tests at U.C.L.A., revealed the fact that Odette's affliction was known as Liposarcoma, a rare type of cancer, so rare, in fact, that only a few cases have been recorded in medical history--and almost all of them have been terminal. The dreadful disease was spreading rapidly now. The doctors, with as much tact and diplomacy as possible, described the necessary surgery to Odette and Jesse. Since the cancer had spread extensively, the left jaw, the teeth on the left side, the left cheek-bone, the bony structure of the left side of the forehead and possibly, both eyes, would have to be removed. Then it would be necessary to re-build the left side of her face by plastic surgery. Many operations would be required, many months of hospitalization, courage, co-operation and understanding by Odette and her family. And, 'the handwriting was on the wall' Odette's chances of surviving were a bit less than 'slim'.

The diagnosis of the condition, and the revelation of the necessary procedure to deal with the condition struck a terrible blow to Odette and Jesse. Odette needed time to gather her thoughts - time before deciding to permit the doctors to begin this seemingly endless and impossible task. How could she face the future--perhaps NO future? What about Jesse, struggling so valiantly to keep discouragement and hopelessness away from her with his love and devotion? What of those two darling little ones? She loved them so dearly. They were so close to her - so much a part of her body and her life--and they NEEDED her!

The pain was by this time becoming unbearable. Pain-killers ceased to relieve the agony. The swelling in her cheek was huge. Somehow, she felt her whole body was deteriorating. At this point, she accepted the inevitable. She must consent to the surgery.

Through these months of suffering, Odette had managed to attend Communion almost daily. With the 'die cast', she began to earnestly desire spiritual strength and faith. She had read much about the Lourdes Shrine in France. Were it financially possible, she felt that would be the one place she could find the comfort, strength and courage necessary to face her unknown future. But such could only be a dream! Perhaps a heart-to-heart talk with a very close and dear friend, Father Long, would help her. Thus it was that Father Richard Long learned of Odette's innermost thoughts and desires, and he was able to give her a tremendous amount of moral and spiritual support. He convinced her that God really cared and would provide all her needs.

Then followed a miracle! A short time passed, and friends, neighbors and relatives banded together, making it financially possible for Odette and Jesse to realize their dream - the dream of visiting the Lourdes Shrine--and in addition, money enough for them to visit as many places of interest as time and strength would permit.

What a WONDERFUL and UNEXPECTED surprise! Almost unbelievable!

Immediately, a problem popped up. What about those two babies? Of course, Odette's mother could be the answer. But she lived in the Philippines! A visa would be required. Money would be necessary for transportation. There was neither time nor money. Surely, if the circumstances were known, some Government Agency could and would help--and help, they did!

Jesse made their needs known to the head of the Navy Relief Society in Oxnard, who immediately contacted the Secretary of Congressman Barry Goldwater, Jr., who, in turn, contacted the State Department. Through the combined efforts and financial support of the Navy Relief Society, Barry Goldwater, Jr., the State Department and the American Red Cross, a visa was issued, transportation supplied, and within a few days, Odette's mother was in their home, prepared to care for Eric and Daryl!

ANOTHER WONDERFUL MIRACLE!



On August 1, 1973, Odette and Jesse left for France and the Lourdes Shrine. Their prayers had reached the One who had it in His power to make all things possible - God - and He had brought about these miracles! Surely, He would continue to bless and guide them. The trip was wonderful. Although Odette was suffering a great deal physically, she was determined to live every moment to its fullest and to enjoy the entire trip as much as she could. The high point, of course, was her visit to the Lourdes Shrine. Here she did receive the spiritual strength and courage to put her absolute faith in God - and permit the surgery required.

She returned home with her heart full of HOPE! She was determined to approach the unknown future with all the courage she had gained, and she was determined to emerge victorious.

Final arrangements were made and Odette entered U.C.L.A., Medical Center for the first of many operations. Then, another miracle developed! The doctors discovered that the malignancy had not reached Odette's eyes. How wonderful! How could she thank God enough for sparing her eyes - both of them? Again, her courage and determination increased.

Miracles were being performed by Odette's doctors. The removal of the entire left side of Odette's face had been accomplished. It was necessary now to begin re-constructing her face by plastic surgery. Then, other parts of Odette's body yielded ten healthy skin grafts. From the skin grafts, a 'living tube' was constructed, known as a Bekamjan Flap. One end of the tube was attached to the left side of Odette's chest. The other end was attached to her forehead. This 'living tissue' grew and expanded, covering the entire forehead area with healthy tissue. Truly, another miracle! The worst was over. The malignancy was gone!

Odette is still undergoing operation after operation, as the re-construction of her face continues. As I write her story, she is recovering from the twenty-fifth operation! The Bakamjan Flap has completed its work and has been removed. The doctors contemplate approximately fifteen more operations!



Unbelievable? Incredible? Yes! All of that and much more! Occasionally Odette is permitted to return home for a short period of time. Every moment of these "free" weeks is spent loving and caring for her two darling little sons, and planning the future with her devoted Jesse. Each "free" week draws them closer to the time Odette will return home to stay.

Each time Odette returns to U.C.L.A., another operation is performed. While recuperating, she spends her time creating a variety of beautiful, saleable articles - crocheted items, needlepoint, flower arrangements, etc. And she is constantly 'lending a hand' when possible, to her nurses and other patients. She spends time reading. She loves good books - (hence her hospital library mentioned earlier).

Jesse takes the children and Grandma to the hospital very often to visit Odette. While the children and Grandma wait in the patio, he transports Odette in a wheel chair to join them. They have a wonderful picnic lunch together.

Odette has won a total and tremendous victory! And for this victory, she is constantly expressing her deep and undying gratitude to God, her dear husband, Father Richard Long, the concerned personnel at the Lourdes Shrine, the Navy Relief Society, Congressman Barry Goldwater, Jr., the State Department, the American Red Cross, her U.C.L.A., doctors, her relatives and friends - who have all worked together to bring about so many miracles and have, literally, saved her life!

Odette is happy, content and very busy planning every detail of a future that is now assured. Enthusiasm, joy and a thousand interests occupy her mind. Her faith in God is complete. A little more time and a little more patience will bring this 'nightmare' chapter of her life to a close.

Truly, the Age of Miracles has not passed.