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Drinking Seawater

of storms and survival

Riza Oledan-Ramos
Walt F.J. Goodridge

Drinking Seawater: of storms and survival
by Riza Oledan-Ramos and Walt F.J. Goodridge
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Cover photo of water bladders: Ferdinand Ramos

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Dedication	5
Foreword	6
The Ship	8
Chapter 1: Into the Darkness	9
<i>Flashback: From Biliran to Saipan</i>	25
Chapter 2: Into the Light	47
Chapter 3: Aftermath	67
<i>Flashback: Storms</i>	77
Chapter 4: I'm In America	83
Chapter 5: Day by Day	101
<i>Flashback: Miracle Baby</i>	107
Chapter 6: The FEMA Dilemma	117
<i>Flashback: Overseas Filipino Workers</i>	129
Chapter 7: The Food Stamp Experience	135
<i>Flashback: Confessions</i>	141
Chapter 8: Red Cross	147
Chapter 9: Recovery	151
<i>Flash Forward: The New Normal</i>	155
Appendix	159
Appendix: A Disaster Resource Guide	160
Appendix: A Survival Checklist	162
Appendix: An OFW on Saipan Glossary	166
About the Author	168

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*For additional photos of Soudelor’s devastation of Saipan, visit
www.rizaramosbooks.com/seawater*

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DEDICATION

To my husband and children

To my father, Salvador Oledan

FOREWORD

On the night of Sunday, August 2, 2015, Typhoon Soudelor made landfall on the island of Saipan, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Though officially recorded as a "Category 5-equivalent super typhoon," speculation continues that Soudelor's winds far exceeded this category. Cars and even trucks were overturned, and it was later discovered that the wind speed recording equipment was destroyed during the storm; the highest speed recorded before the failure was 180 miles per hour. At the time, it was the most powerful storm to make landfall....ever...anywhere that year.

The eye of a storm is a roughly circular region of mostly calm weather, typically 30–65 km (20–40 miles) in diameter, located at the center of strong tropical cyclones. It is surrounded by the eyewall, a ring of towering thunderstorms where the most severe weather occurs. Soudelor's core—the eye and eyewall—was *smaller* than the island. That's why the devastation on Saipan was so intense, and why the neighboring island of Tinian, only two miles away, was virtually untouched by the storm.

Riza Ramos, her husband Ferdinand, and two children survived the devastation of that typhoon at point during which they were actually outside and unsheltered. *Drinking Seawater* is that story. However there is more.

A metaphor and more

Along with about half the population of 48,000 on Saipan, Riza Ramos is an OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker). What is it like to live and work over a thousand miles from home, family and loved ones? What is it like to provide for a family of four on a contract worker's income? What is it like to experience the storms and challenges of such a life choice?

The answer to those questions is: seawater.

According to the rules of survival at sea, if you ever find yourself adrift in the ocean, the last thing you should ever do is drink seawater. It dehydrates the body and brings on death more surely than anything else.

However, according to the rules of survival in *life*, as Riza and her family discovered, sometimes drinking seawater can be the only way to save your life.

“Drinking seawater” is a metaphor for survival. Sometimes, survival requires that you courageously drink seawater as you cross oceans in pursuit of your dreams. Sometimes, you drink the seawater of your own tears of despair far away from your family and homeland. Sometimes you drink seawater when you swallow your pride for the sake of your family. Sometimes, you might have to drink seawater—literally—when disaster strikes.

Drinking seawater—the metaphor—encompasses the courage, sacrifice, patience, perseverance, resiliency and compassion often required to survive life’s storms be they figurative or literal.

Drinking Seawater—the book—from heart-breaking pain to heart-stopping terror and back again, peppered with flashbacks of how it all came to be, is a peek into one woman’s and one family’s survival through life and storms of all kinds.

I hope her adventure touches you.

- Walt F.J. Goodridge

The Ship

Left the shore
steered my wheel
bound somewhere,
My luggage,
nothing,
nothing but
loved one's keepsakes,
Adrift,
at first,
in the oceans of dreams,
I must
I will
bring this ship to moor,
but never should I drop the anchor.
I'll brave the storm,
the coldness
for my dreams
kept me warm,
Gigantic waves,
I'll glide
through them,
No!
nothing to worry,
the stars are my guide
through this journey.
"Home is green"
Father's word.
I said
"Greener one"
If I could, I'll stay,
If I stayed
and never pulled the anchor,
what could have been?
what would I be?
No!
I will steer
through the seawater
or thick air,
for I am a ship
And ship
Sails!

CHAPTER 1

Into the Darkness

Sunday, August 2, 2015

August 2015

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
						1
	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

Sometime after 11:00pm

“Grab the papers and follow me! I’ll bring Junior to the car! Now! Go! Get the passports!”

I had second thoughts about following my husband Ferdinand’s orders. I had heard that fleeing in the middle of a storm was not safe, but when I saw the water pouring in through the ceiling and into our living room like a waterfall, I knew we had to leave. Just moments earlier, we had heard loud cracking and splitting sounds and the walls shook violently. It would probably be only a matter of seconds before the entire house collapsed in on us!

This wasn't your typical storm. This was something entirely different—something of a completely different nature than I or anyone else had ever experienced. It was as if it were alive. It sounded and felt as if it were a living thing—a conscious, breathing, thinking being with an intention, and on a mission. It was trying to get to us. First it tried the front door, then it tried the side walls; then the windows, finally the roof. Ah, yes, it must have thought, the roof. It pounded and howled and screamed at the roof, then back to the front door, then the back windows, and then back to the roof. The howling never stopped. It pounded and shook and finally it got its way. It tore our roof off and flung it into the night as it raced inside after us!

My hands trembled as I ran to my writing table and grabbed the plastic Ziploc bag with our passports and other documents. Rain and seawater soaked me and, as I stuffed the Ziploc into my duffel bag, I felt something fall out and hit the floor. I knew it might have been something important, but didn't have time to see what it was.

Strangely, at that very moment, I remembered a story I once read about a man convicted of a crime who was given the chance to choose his sentence. He was allowed to choose between a firing squad and entering an empty room—between a known fate and an unknown one. Either choice could result in death, but choosing the room held just the smallest chance of leading to freedom. In my mind, leaving our home on that August night and stepping out into the 180 mile-per-hour winds of Typhoon Soudelor—the most powerful typhoon to hit Saipan in fifty years—was like choosing the empty room: unknown and dangerous, but staying would have meant certain death.

Complete and total darkness. There was still power in San Jose, but it was pitch black out in the yard and the road was dark. It was pouring rain and my clothes got quickly soaked as I ran the few feet from our doorway to the car.

“But where should we go?!” I shouted as I got in and slammed the door.

“No questions! Just hold this for me!” Ferdinand gave me the mountain bike headlight he had been charging from earlier that

morning. Luckily we had it. The light on the utility pole next to our house was already gone and our street was so dark that the car headlights weren't enough to see more than a few feet in front of us. I aimed it unto the road as we drove.

Four year-old Junior was strapped into his car seat in the back, and his older brother Dylan, fourteen, sat next to him. I sat beside my husband and the wind howled and shook the car as we drove slowly into the darkness.

There was water everywhere. Apengagh Street, the narrow road that leads from our house to San Jose Church looked like it was the ocean.

"The church! Let's go inside the church!" I shouted. However, when I turned the light towards the church entrance we saw the front door had already been blown in and there was broken glass and water everywhere.

"Dios ko! Dios ko!" (My God! My God!) Ferdinand whispered the words to himself as he drove. The wind was howling and the car rocked like a boat. I heard rumbling and the sound of crashing metal all around us. All the car windows were rolled up and the glass was fogged from all of us breathing. Ferdinand wiped the inside windshield with one hand and steered the car with the other as we drove deeper into the night and into the storm without a destination or plan.

As we approached Golden Harvest International School on the corner of Apengagh Avenue and Ghiyeghe Street, I heard and felt a "blug" sound that jolted the car. It was a coconut tree lying across the road. Ferdinand maneuvered around it. We passed Golden harvest and then it happened again. "Blug!" This time the car jerked forward. I aimed the light ahead of us and we saw another big coconut tree blocking our path. Ferdinand tried to maneuver around this one, too, but it was too big. The car was stuck and the front right wheel was spinning without traction.

"Let's go to San Jose!" I shouted. We were about two hundred feet from San Jose Mart, the all-night convenience store on the corner.

“It’s open twenty-four hours! I know it’s open!” I shouted again. I pushed hard against the car door fighting the wind. It took all of my strength, and when I finally pushed it open, I saw a flicker of light coming from the veranda of a house to our right. “Look! There’s a house! The house with the Virgin Mary statue outside! Let’s go!”

I didn’t know who lived there. All I knew was it was a house, a concrete house, with a roof. I jumped from the car and realized I wasn’t even wearing any slippers. I ran barefoot across the dirt and pavement, through the rising water and mud and grass, and into the yard; I didn’t feel a thing under my feet. Everyone followed.

Ferdinand held Junior, safely shielding the boy’s body from the wind and rain. We ran, fighting against the howling wind as it threatened to blow us back towards the car. I aimed the light towards the house and noticed that the tin roof on the garage side where the main door was located had already blown away.

“Open the door! Open the door, please!” I shouted and knocked as hard as I could but nobody answered. The scream of the wind and all the commotion outside was just too loud.

“Come on, let’s hide in the back!” Ferdinand shouted over the wind. We ran to the side of the house hoping the force of the wind wouldn’t be as strong, but it was exactly the same. It was everywhere.

As we made our way along the side of the house, I heard rumbling and the sound of objects breaking. Dylan tripped, and I thought he was injured but, thank God, he was okay. I looked up towards the clouds and saw something ominous and frightening. The clouds had formed into a circle; it was bright in the middle and rays of light were shining through. It was like a scene from an apocalypse movie. I rubbed my eyes hoping I was just dreaming. I wasn’t. It was very, very real.

“Oh my God, Jesus Christ, please help us! I don’t want to die! Please protect my family, oh Lord,” I prayed. I really thought it was the end of our world.

After a minute huddled in the back of the house with the wind and rain pounding us, then we went back to the main door on the

garage side. This time Ferdinand pounded on it with all of his strength as if he was trying to break it down.

This time somebody heard it. The door opened slowly. It was an older, Filipino man in his sixties. He saw our soaking family on his driveway, and opened it more. Ferdinand, with Junior in his arms, went inside first, then Dylan and I followed. Then a slim lady appeared. She was perhaps in her mid thirties and had deep-set eyes.

“Come inside!” she shouted over the wind. “Come! Come!”

“Sorry to bother you,” I said apologetically. I couldn’t help being courteous even with the storm raging behind us, “but the roof of our house was blown.”

“No, it’s okay!” she said. “Our door is open for you!”

Behind her was a medium-sized man. He was about 5 feet 6 inches tall, and had warm eyes. He immediately went to the bedroom and returned with dry towels for each of us.

Dylan was shivering. He had been wearing only his boxers when we fled the house. The woman went quickly into another room and returned with dry clothes for the four of us.

Their names were Shirley and Ken. We stripped our soaking shirts right there in their living room and changed into the dry clothes Shirley gave us. Then we covered ourselves with the towels Ken brought. They offered us coffee and warm milk for Junior.

Their house was made of concrete and had a concrete roof but we could still feel the whole thing vibrate as the storm raged on, Shirley offered us a futon, pillows and blankets to sleep in their living room, though I doubted any of us would be able to sleep with the wind as loud as it was and with all the shaking and banging.

Before we arrived, Shirley had been burning an old palm leaf—the kind we used during Palm Sunday church services. After we were all settled in, she continued walking through the house with the smoking leaf in her hand, praying for protection.

“This is a very strong typhoon,” Ken said while Shirley performed the ritual. “I hope no one dies.”

“Let’s just pray,” I replied.

“What if the sea rises?” Shirley’s voice trembled with fear. “I don’t know how to swim. Maybe we will have to go on the roof.”

That image of us having to escape flooding by climbing on the roof in the middle of a powerful typhoon scared me. *Jesus Christ, please don’t allow that to happen, my kids are still young.* I joined Shirley with my own silent prayer.

While the wind pounded the house, I heard Shirley and Ken’s kids crying inside the bedroom. Junior, too, cried whenever we put him down; he wanted to be cuddled, so Ferdinand and I took turns holding him through the night. Dylan was silent, still shivering as he sat on the couch.

I thought about the horror we had just escaped and of our neighbors’ fates. Our building had four units, each separated from the other by a double wooden wall. We lived in the fourth unit on the end. A woman named Mel lived in unit three. Unit two was empty at that time, and Lita, a woman in her sixties from the Philippines, lived in unit one, three doors down from ours.

I turned to Ferdinand. “What about Ate Lita?” In Tagalog—the main language of the Philippines—“Ate” (pronounced A-tay) is a term of respect used when addressing an older woman. The word actually means “big sister.”

Ate Lita is a caring soul who loves to cook muffins and pancit (noodles) and always offered us a portion of whatever she prepared.

One night, just after midnight, she called me and asked me to walk to her unit since she was having stomach pain and had already vomited twice. Once I got to her apartment, she said she hadn’t wanted to disturb me, as she knew I would likely be tired from work, but she knew I was a nurse at CHC (Commonwealth Health Center).

“No problem,” I assured her. “What are we neighbors for?” I checked her blood pressure and found it within normal range, so I asked her what she had eaten that day.

“Local tangerines,” she replied. “They were so sweet I couldn’t help eating about five of them.”

“The tangerines may have triggered all the acids in your stomach,” I told her. “You should avoid eating them for now.” Then I stayed for an hour and we just talked. Her daughter in the Philippines was about my age and Ate Lita often encouraged her to apply for a job here on Saipan so they could be together.

“I wish she was here now,” she said with a sad and distant look in her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” I comforted her. “I could take care of you while your daughter is not here yet.”

We chatted some more, and after her stomach pain subsided, I walked back home. It was after 1:00am, but I told her she could call me at any time if things got worse and I would take her to the hospital. The next morning, I checked on her again. She was happy to see me, and told me she was all better. I’ve never believed her pain was due simply to those tangerines.

As I sat on Ken and Shirley’s couch, I checked my phone and discovered an unread text from Ate Lita. She must have sent it while were escaping our house:



can I move to your house? my roof is already blown and some branches of a tree go inside my ceiling

My heart pounded as I read it. Oh, my God!

Find out what happens next!

Order *Drinking Seawater* at www.rizaramosbooks.com

Seawater Photo Gallery Into the Light



Early the next morning in front of Dolphin Wholesale



The aftermath of winds powerful enough to overturn trucks.



The road to Kannat Tabla; downed poles on the eastbound side. This is the tsunami evacuation route to higher ground that we would have taken had the coconut tree not blocked our path.



More damage in Dan Dan



Overturnd car on Beach Road



Our house with no roof

About the Author



Riza Oledan-Ramos grew up in Cabucgayan, Biliran, Philippines. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the Martinez Memorial College in Kaloocan City, and is currently a staff nurse at the Commonwealth Health Center (CHC) on Saipan, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. She has written dozens of poems, and her books include: *The Boy Who Dreamed to Be With His*

Parents on Saipan, Germ Stopper Boy, and Drinking Seawater.

Visit Riza's website at www.rizaramosbooks.com

About the Writer



Walt F.J. Goodridge is known as the "Passion Prophet." A graduate of Columbia University with a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering, Walt walked away from his career to pursue his passion for music, writing and coaching others. He is author of over twenty-five books including *Turn Your Passion Into Profit*, and *Chicken Feathers & Garlic Skin:*

Diary of a Chinese Garment Factory Girl on Saipan and collaborated with Riza on this project. Walt is originally from the island of Jamaica.

Take Walt's free "Passionpreneur" Personality Test at

www.passionprofit.com