[Snap Judgment]

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** When I was a kid, eight, nine years old, rural Michigan, out in the sticks, grapes. Green, purple grapes. They're really hard to come by, but I love them. I love them. So exotic, still on the vine, so civilized. Like on the TV. Something that we might get to taste only if the white folks are coming over from church. But this day, nobody extra is invited inside the house. It's the worried faces time, the hushed voices time. My mother scoops us out oatmeal for breakfast. Later on, we eat from that same pot of oatmeal for lunch. And when my mother brings us out bowls of oatmeal for dinner, my brothers start to cry because they're younger than me, they don't know any better. I don't cry. Instead, I tell them how good it tastes, especially when you don't put nothing on it. No honey, no butter, no sugar, all that stuff we don't have makes it nasty. "Look, look, look, look." I'm shoving spoonfuls of oatmeal on my face. Now, they're laughing and eating. But my parents turn away, go to bed, stomach churning.

[frying oil sound]

I wake up to the smell of frying sausages, toast, eggs, and I hate it. Hate it, I hate it. I get out of bed, go to the kitchen. There, on the table directly in front of my plate, grapes. Big, green grapes, the kind my mother knows I love. So now, I hate grapes too. Because where I live, rural Michigan, our community actually doesn't have any secrets. They know, just like I know, that this magnificent breakfast spread came from out behind the IGA, where they throw their expired food in the garbage bin. To get it, they make you dig deep. You've got to root through that garbage where everyone can see you picking through the trash. Every kid's parent tells every kid, so every kid can come tell me, "We saw your mama rooting in the garbage. Is she Oscar the Grouch? [laughs]"

They laugh. They laugh and I burn. I burn thinking about it, "I can't eat this. I can't." My mother comes over, kisses me on the forehead, and she says, "Lord willing, one day, you're going to have a little boy that you would do anything for."

[upbeat music]

Today, on Snap Judgment, we proudly present The Baton. My name is Glynn Washington. And my mama knew exactly what she was talking about, and she didn't even listen to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

We begin. Now, you know the things you heard growing up, the warnings, the threats, things said over and over, the stuff you know it doesn't matter. Our story from the perspective of the person living it, takes us into the center of a natural disaster, so listener discretion is advised, because one boy has to try to remember all those things that he thought didn't matter. Snap Judgment

**Liz:** Rizal Sahputra was on leave from army training, visiting home for the first time in a long while. That first night, he and his mom stayed up late watching movies and talking.

**Rizal:** From 8:30 all the way until 01:00 AM.

**Liz:** 01:00 AM, that magical hour when people start to open up and say things they wouldn't normally say.

**Rizal:** She was asking whether I have a girlfriend or not. I said, "Yes, mom, I have a girlfriend."

**Liz:** Rizal told her he'd introduce them the next day. Then, his mother shared something of her own.

**Rizal:** During that night, my mom told me, "Rizal, you know what? I might be gone very soon." I said, "No, mom, you're still fine. Don't worry." My mom said, "But I feel that I'm going soon." I said, "Mom, if that really happened, please forgive me if I make a lot of mistakes to you." My mom said, "You are a good man. You are my good son."

**Liz:** Even though he didn't want to believe what his mother had said, Rizal had a nagging thought because just a week before, something had happened.

**Rizal:** What happened is that I had a dream.

**Liz:** In his dream, all of his teeth fell out of his mouth.

**Rizal:** The whole teeth is gone. Based on our belief, if you have that dream meaning the entire family will be gone.

**Liz:** After the talk with his mom, Rizal went to sleep that night perturbed. He woke up the next morning at 07:00 AM, put on a yellow t-shirt and a pair of green shorts his dad had given him.

**Rizal:** Then, the earthquake started. Everything is shaking. The trees are moving, the house is moving. It's about three minutes.

**Liz:** The earthquake's magnitude was a 9.1 on the Richter scale. The force of the earthquake was so strong that Rizal and his family, unable to stand, sat on the ground waiting for it to end.

**Rizal:** What I hear is the houses collapse, [onomatopoeia] people screaming "Help. Help."

**Liz:** He remembers the sound of the coconuts falling from the trees. By 7:20, the earthquake had stopped. Rizal, his mother, his sister, and his father were okay. So was their house. Now, for Rizal, alarm bells were going off.

**Rizal:** In our belief, if the earthquake very strong happened in the morning before 12:00 PM, there's going to be a big, big disaster coming to that place. I did ask my dad, "Dad, will this really happen? Dad, can you tell us what will happen next?" I asked him that three times. He just kept quiet. His face looks scared. That's the first time in my life my dad never answered my question.

**Liz:** Not knowing what else to do, Rizal and his dad carried on and went to the mosque. Searching for answers, Rizal looked for the Imam to ask again, "Did the earthquake mean something bad was coming?"

**Rizal:** "Have you guys experienced a big, very strong earthquake in the past?" He just walked away from me.

**Liz:** In total, he spoke to five elders in the village, but no one would answer his questions. Strangely, nobody except for Rizal talked about the one thing that was on everyone's mind.

**Rizal:** Then, my dad said, "Rizal, stop talking."

**Liz:** At 7:30, one of the kids from the village came running.

**Rizal:** He ran toward us. First thing, he looked at me, he said, "Brother, Rizal, run. The tsunami is coming."

**Liz:** Rizal remembers hearing a sound almost like a helicopter flying overhead. He ran to the road and looked up to the sea. All he saw was a black wave coming towards him.

**Rizal:** I thought, "Allahu Akbar, today is the last day of the world. Everybody is going to die today."

**Liz:** The wave was about seven, eight stories tall. In Rizal's line of sight, from the mosque to the ocean, he could usually see an island not far from shore. But when he looked, it had disappeared, consumed entirely by the wave.

**Rizal:** Everybody was gone. Everybody was just running away. My dad's still there. He's just still standing. I don't know what he's thinking about. Then, I just go, I hug him. I shook his hand. I said, "Dad, please forgive me if I have made lot of mistakes to you. Please forgive me." Then, my dad said the same result. He looked so sad. He said run.

**Liz:** But instead, Rizal went to his sister.

**Rizal:** I also hugged my sister. I also shook her hand and said, "Sister, please forgive me." And she didn’t smile, didn't say anything. After that, my dad screamed at me and say, "Rizal, run. Don't wait for us. Just run."

**Liz:** Rizal was a strong runner. He'd been a champion in high school and because he was in army training, he was in good shape. So, when his dad told him to go and leave them behind, he started running, fast.

**Rizal:** Your whole thought is only one. You want to be alive. There's a mountain. It's about 2 kilometers away. About 100 meters I ran. I look back and the wave had taken away my house, my dad, my sister. I don't see them anymore. People are screaming. The trees are falling. Everything is like crashing shadows.

**Liz:** Rizal was trying to reach higher ground. So, he headed towards a mountain nearby.

**Rizal:** While I was running, I met people in the middle of the road. They didn’t know what to do. I told them, "Don't wait here. Run." They just sit down, they don't do anything, they just keep crying and screaming. And I just keep running. I managed to reach almost to the mountains. At the foot of the mountain, I met my uncle.

**Liz:** Rizal stopped in his tracks. His uncle was sick and weak and wouldn't make it there in time.

**Rizal:** He said, "Rizal, don't help me. Save yourself."

**Liz:** If he kept going, Rizal would make it to the top ahead of the wave.

**Rizal:** I told him, "I just cannot let you go, uncle. If I mean to die, I'll die. If I don't mean to be died, I won't die."

**Liz:** Rizal was still carrying his uncle when the wave hit.

**Rizal:** When the wave hit me, my first thought is, "God, I don't want to die yet."

**Liz:** In the water, he and his uncle were torn apart.

**Rizal:** The water is very dark, black. You can't see anything. I just keep praying, just keep saying, "[chanting Quran] Please help me."

**Liz:** For the next several minutes, he couldn't breathe. He found himself tumbling, not knowing up from down. Then, he felt something push him out of the water into the air and up into the mango trees. When he was hit by the wave and then the trees and then the debris swirling in the water, Rizal didn't feel anything except for the fear. It wasn't until he found himself safely perched atop the mango trees that he started to feel the pain.

**Rizal:** So much pain on my body, blue everywhere.

**Liz:** The yellow t-shirt and green shorts his dad had given him.

**Rizal:** The whole clothes were just red. Blood everywhere in my body.

**Liz:** Rizal's back was injured, so were both his legs, cut up by broken branches colliding into him in the water. His left ankle was broken. Any pain was soon overshadowed by shock because from on top of the mango trees when Rizal looked towards where his home should be, he saw nothing.

**Rizal:** My village is all sea. It's all gone. Everything is dark. I don't see any humans anymore. I remember I only see mountains. When I was on top of the trees, I was asking, "God, please don't bring me to the sea. If you bring me to the sea, I think I'll be gone."

**Liz:** Then, the second wave came. The mango tree that was keeping Rizal safe collapsed under the force of the surging water. He lost sight of everything as the wave took him down. Rizal doesn't remember exactly how long he was inside, but he knows it was too long to survive without air.

**Rizal:** The only thing that I have in my mind is that I'm going to die. That's it. That moment, I said, "I know my parents, all my family will be gone. So, let me live. Save me God, because if you save me, I can pray for them. Pull me up. Save me."

**Liz:** Rizal says that in the dark opaque water, he saw something. A man who looked like an Imam, dressed in white, glowing.

**Rizal:** He looked like a young guy. He didn't talk to me or anything, he didn't say anything. He smiled at me.

**Liz:** He says it was an angel.

**Rizal:** The angel pulled me up. He gave me air right into my nose. That person is the one that rescued me.

**Liz:** When Rizal emerged from the tsunami, he saw that the wave had taken him far from the mango trees. Out in the open sea, the water was calm, treading in place.

**Rizal:** The first thing I do is I said, "God, please give me something that I can hold on. God, give me some trees." After I just said, "Allahu Akbar," then the trees just suddenly appeared in front of me.

**Liz:** He caught a tree floating by and held on tight.

**Rizal:** I said, "God, just one, I think, is not enough. Give me more."

**Liz:** More came, more trees and broken branches. Rizal grabbed as many as he could.

**Rizal:** I know there's nobody going to rescue me. I have to build this as soon as possible. First thing I do is I look at the trees. The trees you can take the skin. The skin you can use for a rope.

**Liz:** Rizal was using this bark or the skin of the tree as a rope to tie the tree branches together. It was a trick his grandfather, who he used to live with in the jungle, had taught him. Rizal listened closely as his grandfather taught him how to pick out which trees had the best skin, the strongest bark to tie things, which trees could float on water.

**Rizal:** So, I pull it one by one, one by one, one by one, so I just put, put, put, then I collect until I make a raft. Then, I sit down on the top.

**Liz:** It took him about two hours to build. Then, Rizal climbed onto the raft. It was still morning.

**Glynn:** What happens on day two with Rizal still at sea? When Snap Judgment returns, stay tuned.

[intriguing music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Baton episode. When last we left, Rizal had survived a tsunami that destroyed everything and everyone he knew. After his first day at sea alone, he had no idea of what to do next. Snap Judgment.

**Liz:** When you're in the midst of chaos and then you suddenly get a moment, a moment of silence, that's when you start to think.

**Rizal:** I started to think about my mom, my dad, my families. I also thought of this kind of wave not only hitting my town, it's possible also hitting the whole of Sumatra, the whole of Indonesia.

**Liz:** At one point, Rizal even thought that the tsunami might have hit the entire world. From the top of his raft, as it floated on, he could make out trees in the distance. Looking closer, he began to see eyes peeking out from behind them. Kids.

**Rizal:** So many kids around the age of 12 to 16 years old. I've seen more than 100 of them. All of them are naked. They sit on the coconut trees. Two here, one there. They are distant from me.

**Liz:** In the water, there wasn't much to hold on to. The only way anyone could really survive was by clinging onto the tops of the coconut trees, the only things tall enough to poke out of the water. Rizal was too far out to reach them.

**Rizal:** I scream. I say, "Brother, little brother, can you hear me? What's your name?" Actually, they look at me when I called them, but nobody speak to me. They look so scared, so much fear on their face. I think they were thinking what's really happening? Next, they were thinking how to save themselves. The first day, I've seen so many kids. I've seen many of them.

**Liz:** As the hours passed, Rizal drifted further and further away. He started to call out to others, his family members. Maybe they had survived. Maybe they could hear him.

**Rizal:** So, I called one by one. I called, "Suryana."

**Liz:** His mom.

**Rizal:** Didn't respond. "Abdul Hamid."

**Liz:** His dad.

**Rizal:** Then, I said, "Asirah."

**Liz:** His sister.

**Rizal:** Then my cousin name, my uncle name, my aunty name, Maimani, Mary, Iskandar, Nandar. Destra, Vicki, Duvita, Mantari, Biman, Safia, Sutpetro, Zulina. Nobody respond. Salamun, Ansari, Mordani.

**Liz:** Floating in the water, debris trees, plastic bags, they began to surround Rizal on his raft. After a few hours, he saw something else.

**Rizal:** I saw an army bag floating somewhere near to me.

**Liz:** It was about 50ft away.

**Rizal:** What I did is I swam away to take the bag. What I found inside the bag is an army knife.

**Liz:** Then.

**Rizal:** I saw a coconut floating just very near to me. Again, I swim, I took the coconuts, nine or eight of them. I was so thirsty. So, I took that knife. I just drank all of them. I drank all of them. Then, something I feel in my stomach.

**Liz:** All of the water Rizal had consumed while he was in the tsunami, the dark black water came pouring out of him.

**Rizal:** I was just sitting down doing nothing. Just asking myself, "What is really happening? Was this end of the world? Or there is going to be another wave coming to hit me and take me away?" It just like I think about three hours to four hours, I was just sitting quietly, just thinking what will happen next.

**Liz:** Until that evening.

**Rizal:** A guy came to me. This guy was holding one of the trees. He's trying to swim to my raft. Then, he said, "Bro, please help me. Please help me."

**Liz:** His body was white. So white that Rizal thought he must be a ghost.

**Rizal:** After that, I just looked at him. "Oh, I think he's human."

**Liz:** For a brief moment, Rizal worried they would both sink if he let the man onto the raft.

**Rizal:** I pulled him up from the water, I put him into the raft.

**Liz:** It held.

**Rizal:** His name is Fadli. He's a policeman, still in uniform. He was attached to one of the police stations in my town. I don't know him at all, but he knows me.

**Liz:** When the tsunami first began, Fadli ran up to the mountain.

**Rizal:** After he ran out into the mountain, then he felt not secure because in Muslim belief, the end of the day the water will come, the mountain will explode.

**Liz:** So, after running all the way up, he decided to run back down.

**Rizal:** That's the moment when the wave took him away.

**Liz:** Rizal asked Fadli about his family. Then he proposed a deal.

**Rizal:** "If I survived, I will go and find your parents. Tell your parents that I met you. If you survive, please go and find my family. This is my family name, this is my father's name, my mother's name, my brother's name. Please tell them you met me in the sea." After that moment, straight away he said, "Rizal, I want to rest, I'm very tired. Can I just sleep?" I said, "Yes, go ahead and sleep." The last word I said, "If we were to be alive together, you and me will be brothers forever." That's what I told him. So, he said, "Agree."

**Liz:** After he promised, Fadli lay down to sleep. That night, Rizal heard the cries of other people calling for help but couldn't see them in the darkness. It was only the end of day one.

**Rizal:** The next morning, I think about 07:00 AM, I was trying to wake him up. I say, "Fadli, wake up. Wake up, bro. It's early morning." He didn't respond. So, I say, "Fadli, wake up. Wake up, Fadli." He didn't respond. I check his body, check his blood, check his nose. While I'm checking on him, I sit down and I pray. I say, "God, don't take him away. At least I got somebody, some friend that's alive together."

**Liz:** But when he felt Fadli's pulse, he felt nothing.

**Rizal:** At that moment, I feel that, "Ah, my friend, you have gone." So, I don't have a friend to talk anymore.

**Liz:** In the end, Rizal couldn't bear to let Fadley's body go into the sea. So, he swam away from the raft to leave the body in peace. Rizal gathered whatever branches he found around him floating in the water to build himself a new raft to wait in alone.

**Rizal:** I never crossed it in my mind that I'm going to die. No, because I remember my dad said, "Don't give up, don't leave your raft."

**Liz:** In the weeks before the tsunami, when Rizal had headed out to go deep sea fishing, his dad had told him to listen carefully. "If you ever get stranded at sea," he said, "just wait for the cargo ships."

**Rizal:** There will be always cargo from all the way from the US, from Africa that would come to our ocean.

**Liz:** Because of their central location right next to the Strait of Malacca, he said there would always be someone passing by.

**Rizal:** "So, don't worry. Just don't give up. One day, if you still survive, that cargo will find you."

**Liz:** The next day and then the day after that, Rizal tried to keep up his strength. As the ocean gradually emptied of survivors and slowly began to fill with the bodies they left behind, Rizal struggled to find food and water. Instead, he used what he had to survive.

**Rizal:** What happened is I took away my clothes, so then I just hold it. Day two, day three, day four, I think day six and day eight day, there is raining. So, the water stick on the clothes. I squeeze my t-shirt, then there's water in it. So, that's how I drink the water.

**Liz:** The days passed slowly. Rizal kept his spirits up by looking at the night sky. Earlier that month, when his father had told him about the cargo ships, he'd also said--

**Rizal:** He said that "When I die, look at the stars. There's me there. If you miss me, just look at the stars. I'll be there for you."

**Liz:** His father had pointed to the Seven Sisters cluster. Every night, Rizal looked for them and took what comfort he could.

**Rizal:** I feel they are there with me even though I don't see them, I cannot touch them.

**Liz:** But with the comfort of the night sky, also came the threat of falling into a deep sleep.

**Rizal:** Every day I feel so tired, I feel like I want to sleep.

**Liz:** Rizal knew that if he did, he might fall off the raft.

**Rizal:** I cannot sleep because you can only sit on it. You cannot sleep. Whenever I feel sleep, then that thing come to me. The whispering, "Rizal, don't sleep if you want to be alive. Keep up."

**Liz:** Rizal started to see boats, mostly big ships, pretty far away, though one time a ferry came by so close he could see passengers smoking on the deck. He tried to yell for them, nearly drowned trying to reach them. But still, the ferry passed him by. They all passed him by every single day. At one point, not having spoken to another person for days, Rizal began to talk to the birds.

**Rizal:** "I know you are close to God. Please tell the God to please send somebody, okay, to rescue me. If you see any human, please talk to human. Or if you see any ship, just talk to that ship. Please tell them that I'm still alive here, okay, bird? But please, please, I'm struggling here. Yeah, I'm very struggling here."

**Liz:** On the 9th day, Rizal tried to die.

**Rizal:** It was around 1:00 in the afternoon, the cargo ship was green, came so close to me. I think I believe they saw me because I can see the people on the ship. I don't know why, they just sailed away. I was angry. I slipped. The water was very strong. I was so angry. "Why, God? Why these people didn't rescue me? Why these people left me?" I cried. I was angry. I think about one hour, I was sitting down, I was angry, and then I just kept quiet.

**Liz:** He swam away from the raft, ready to drown.

**Rizal:** All the energy left. That strong feeling, you are very strong, it goes away from me, so I become weak. It's the thing, like you are losing hope. "God, why you do this to me?"

**Liz:** But he couldn't do it. He swam back to his raft, climbed back up, and waited.

**Rizal:** I saw that the black ship coming from the west. I took away my t-shirt and I put it up like a flag, shouted, "Help, help." Luckily, the captain, somehow, I don't know, he feels something. He feels like there must be someone still alive. So, he took the telescope. Then, he just looked at the sea. Then, he saw me. That's the moment I feel that I'm going to be alive.

**Liz:** The ship was a Japanese ship. The crew came around to Rizal's raft, threw him a rope and pulled him up. They couldn't speak to each other. None of them knew English then. But the crew took care of Rizal for the next several days. One of the men even stayed by Rizal day and night because he was so concerned about his well-being.

**Rizal:** He'd just sit next to me. Just look at me. He'd just ask, "Water? Food?"

**Liz:** A few days later, still on the ship, the Indonesian Embassy called. The captain had gotten in contact with them, and they asked Rizal about what had happened to him for those nine days at sea.

**Rizal:** "Rizal, can you tell us about your story? What's your name? How old are you? Which part of Aceh are you from? How many of your family--?"

**Liz:** Then, they asked him where he wanted to land.

**Rizal:** "You want to stop in Malaysia? You want to stop in Singapore? Or you want to stop in Japan?" Because that time I couldn't speak English, so I know Malaysian is like a Muslim country, so I think it's good for me to go to Malaysia.

**Liz:** That's where he stayed for the next 10 years. For years after the tsunami, Rizal used to wonder why it was that he survived. But he knows now that his family members were the ones who saved him. His grandfather, who taught him how to make a raft. His father, who told him to stay and wait for help.

How do you feel when you look at the ocean?

**Rizal:** In the first five years, I was always thinking about how I survived in the sea. Only moment that always crossed my mind is the moment of the tsunami. When I see my dad saying bye to me, when I see my mom sitting there in front of my house, they always smile at me. My mom smiles at me. My dad smiles at me. My sister, my grandparents.

**Liz:** Even though he knows they won't answer back, when Rizal looks out at the ocean now, he asks--

**Rizal:** "Dad, mom, are you still alive? I'm not too sure yet. Maybe you're somewhere."

[ominous music]

**Glynn:** Thank you so much, Rizal, for sharing a piece of yourself, that you walk in the light. Original score for this piece is by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by Liz Mak.

[upbeat music]

Yes. Yes. Yes. We did it again together. Are you different now than when we started? Because I know I am, but I hope you are too. If you want to be the most interesting person in any room you enter, the answer is simple, because there are more Snap Judgment journeys to be had on the Snap Judgment podcast. And Snap is on the Twitter, the Instagram, the Facebook.

Snap is brought to you by the team that instinctively, no matter where they're dropped, always know which way is north. Except, of course, the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich, who has no idea, but still insists everybody follow him because he feels it in his bones. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, John Fecile, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, Marisa Dodge, David Exumé, Regina Bediako, Annie Nguyen, Bo Walsh, and Zahra Noorbakhsh.

Now, contrary to any word on the street, this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you can come to my house, and I'll make you a delicious, lovingly prepared salad of exotic greens and ripe fruits but only on the days the local Safeway throws out their old produce, that's feast day at our house. And you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*