

## **Autoethnography of a Hermit Crab**

*(Disclaimer: The names used in this personal essay are fictional to protect identities.)*

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*"You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."  
– Mary Oliver, Wild Geese (1986)*

THE ARRIVAL OF THE HABAGAT is my most anticipated season.

The Southwest Monsoon is said to signify a kind of sea cleansing, for it returns all discarded objects to the shore with the waves. Harold and I used to stroll along the rugged shoreline of Dakdak, searching for empty sigay, which Lola Bebe would buy for a centavo to use in some chandeliers she intended to make. Every morning, we would watch the sun stretch its arms toward the lush Pagatpat trees and settle over a nearby tide pool. During this season, the sea generously gifts us a handful of sigay. The only thing I dislike about the Habagat is that it always brings a windstorm. After a heavy downpour, a rainbow would be painted across the shoreline. Harold and I would then compete to see who could collect the most sigay and earn the most money.

It was already dusk when I heard Nanay Rosalie's sharp whistle during one of our search sessions. Harold and I hurriedly ran and jumped over the rough shoreline. My mother's whistling served as a signal that it was time to go home back then, and an indication that she wasn't angry yet or that a bit of patience was keeping her calm. But I knew I had to brace myself for a pinch once she shouted my name. The thought of getting home quickly stopped when we stumbled upon a peach-colored, palm-sized spiral shell. I picked it up and sensed something moving inside. Then, a claw shot out directly at my finger, causing me to drop the creature. It didn't bleed, but the tingling sensation took a moment to subside.

It was a hermit crab.

I learned that hermit crabs love to venture into the world during the Southwest Monsoon. Maybe because the sea is a welcoming place for them during this season, and they feel a sense of belonging. I often wonder why hermit crabs can't grow their own shells and must rely on what others leave behind: conchs, bottle caps, and even sigay. Once, I tried putting a relatively small hermit crab in an aquarium. I then placed a disposable plastic cup, and the crab immediately found its way inside. It feels as though hermit crabs enter the world with their vulnerability laid bare. And in my peculiar fondness for hermit crabs, I realized that many people resemble these creatures, including Harold.

Harold was like a brother to me. We had known each other for over a decade, and our connection deepened through our mutual love for writing poems and stories. It was Harold who ignited my passion for writing. If it were not because of him, I might still be aimlessly wandering around computer shops, wasting hours playing DOTA.

He also possessed an incredible intelligence that often mesmerized and intimidated our teachers. When you heard him speak in English, it felt almost magical. I don't know how he did it, but he had a way of drawing you in and leaving you in awe. But his intellect lost some of its luster when some people discovered he was gay. It still pains me to recall how many turned away from him because of that.

When we were young, I witnessed Harold endure harsh judgment simply for being himself. I have lost count of how many times I saw him struggle to reshape himself into what others wanted him to be. Aside from collecting sigay, he would join us and the other local boys in diving for sea urchins and shellfish. At one point, he even helped us gather our neighbor's hollow blocks for a measly 25 centavos per pair. He also dared to play basketball with us. During that time, I observed that the sport had become the measure of a man's masculinity. Even one of Dumaguete's prolific writers, Ian Rosales Casocot, described basketball as *coded with toxic and performative masculinity* in an article published by Rappler, such that whoever doesn't know how to play or is not fond of it would be judged or labeled as gay.

One of my most memorable basketball experiences was when Harold and I faced off in a one-on-one game. We used both basketball hoops on the court under the scorching sun. I could barely catch my breath while laughing at how he dribbled the ball; his hips swayed to the rhythm. But I didn't know what happened next because my vision suddenly went black, and the basketball court plunged into darkness. When I regained consciousness, the first thing I saw was Nanay Rosalie tending to the wound on my left cheek. Beside her stood Harold, who smirked at me.

"Gaba nimo (*Karma is on you*)!" He laughed loudly. His laughter echoed from corner to corner, leaving the scar on my left cheek to forever hold its ghost.

I heard this derision toward gay people not only from others but also from Harold's father. Apparently, he weaponized the term *gay* as a form of mockery. Whenever he ridiculed his son, Harold would then act as if there were dust in his eyes. There were also times when Harold had bruises on his face next to his right eye, near his lips, as well as on his legs and back. Whenever asked, Harold would simply shrug it off while casually saying, "*Nadalispang ra ko sa CR bay (I just slipped on something inside the CR)*," despite the clear mark of a hateful blow on his skin. The bruises on his back told stories that were passed from body to body like a cruel inheritance.

His father even jokingly prophesied that in no time, I would be infected by his son's gayness if I continued to spend more time with Harold. How contagious could being gay be? From whom did Harold acquire this infection? Because if we were to trace his roots, we would discover that he is the youngest of his three siblings. His oldest brother already has five children, while his other sister is married to a foreigner. Meanwhile, Harold's childhood playmates—us—none of us, or perhaps not yet, have come out as gay. I wonder if there is a gay virus I didn't know about.

I once read a research article that various biological mechanisms play a critical role in an individual's identity. I learned that inside a mother's womb, hormones shift in ways that make boys appear softer in the eyes of the world. I suppose Harold's *softness* must have already been written into his bones before he ever spoke of it. This challenged my societal norms and made me reflect on how little I understand about sexuality and identity.

Harold and I were once members of the church choir and attended Mass every Sunday. But our Sunday devotions ended one day when a church leader stated in front of us that God didn't create gay people. The church leader claimed that, "Wala sa Bibliya ang mga bayot (*Gay people are not mentioned in the Bible*)."

I vividly remember how Harold's eyes couldn't hide his fear. Perhaps it was because, at that time, people said there were no gays in heaven, as they were just sliding up and down the rainbow. Who wouldn't be frightened about not going to heaven? Isn't it the ultimate prayer of a believer? Harold then begged, almost kneeling before me, requesting that I accompany him to a church confession.

“Basin mao ni ang pamaagi nga dili nako mabayot (*Maybe this is the only way that will cure my gayness*), Harold said.”

We were in our first year of high school when it happened. We then inquired about the church confession schedules and learned that we could attend on Tuesdays and Fridays. Right after class that one Friday, we hurried to the church. Father Aureliu's words have remained deeply rooted in my mind. He said it was not Harold's fault he was born gay. And it was also not gay people's fault that they feel *their way*.

Father Aureliu's sentiment was reflected in a conversation last week with a former colleague. Dr. Abon is both a physician and a church leader. She believes everyone deserves to be in heaven. Dr. Abon asserted that those who claim no gay people will go to heaven are the ones who have not yet received God's grace. We also discussed the science behind biological mechanisms. She affirmed, as Father Aureliu believed, that it is not gay people's fault for being who they are. However, as we were about to conclude our conversation, Dr. Abon emphasized that a man is only for a woman, and a woman is only for a man.

While Gender and Development (GAD) initiatives in schools have gained traction globally, many people still continue to show disdain for gay people. There seems to be a disconnect. In the Philippines, I have observed that church leaders wield more influence than teachers. Because if the former claims that being gay is not wrong yet insists that a man in love with another man is sinful, how can the latter confidently teach that gay people are free to express themselves? In a religious country like ours,

questioning a church leader feels akin to questioning God. This creates the so-called *belief trap*.

On the other hand, hermit crabs are nocturnal animals. Perhaps, they enjoy the night because it allows them to remain hidden from view. At night, they go unnoticed, free from judgment or mockery. No one can mistreat them during this time, enabling them to be the hermit crabs they truly are without concern for others. I recall a moment when my fisherman uncle brought home a net full of shellfish. He was so furious to find a couple of hermit crabs among the catch. He picked them up one by one and ruthlessly grabbed their claws and legs until each crab met a swift demise.

Fables have long celebrated snails as symbols of consistency and perseverance, portraying them as determined creatures navigating the earth. In their world, hermit crabs are often viewed as antagonists or copycats. I suspect some people are captivated by aesthetic beauty. Anything that doesn't meet the criteria is deemed unworthy. Isn't this true for gay people? How often have they been labeled as worthless and pests and abnormal?

I read a 2022 report by Equaldex noting that only 19% of Filipinos found homosexuality justifiable. Even though being gay isn't illegal, the law still suggests that their love isn't real. I recall a story in which one of the gay couples fell ill, and the hospital didn't even recognize the significant other as someone who could make decisions for their partner. How selfish can people be to deny—or even control—how

gay people live their lives? Who gave us the authority to dictate to gay people whom they can love?

To gain insight into love from the perspective of a gay person, I had the privilege of discussing it with Al, a fellow writer who has since become a dear friend, during a writing workshop at UP Cebu. He described love as an act of courage—the bravest decision a gay person can make. What intrigued me was his revelation that gay people are thirsty for love. Al emphasized that for many, physical intimacy serves as a vital bridge to emotional connection. That's why when opportunity knocks at their door, no matter how fleeting those chances may be, they seize them. Al then concluded that some gay individuals would resort to *buying* that love just to feel the connection.

Finding someone with genuine intentions who truly understands our aspirations and history in this rapidly changing world feels increasingly elusive. I often reflect on Al and Harold's experiences and how daunting it must be for them to find someone they can truly trust. How do gay people begin to reclaim the fragments of themselves that they poured into that connection, along with the dreams and hopes intertwined with it? To question Bob Marley, why would we still choose someone worth choosing if the truth remains that each of us will face heartache along our journey?

When Harold and I graduated from high school, I felt heartbroken at the thought of stepping into college alone. His parents did not support his dreams, and the long-awaited free tuition law for state universities was still sitting in folders at that time. Only one state university was nearby Dakdak, but the 8,000-peso semester tuition was a barrier too high for him to afford. This was the moment when our lives began to

diverge: I embarked on my journey toward an education degree, while he moved to the city to work at a call center.

Harold would call me on his days off. I remember how he proudly showcased his growing English skills, even correcting my mispronunciations and teasing me about my Bisaya accent. But one day, in the middle of one of our routine calls, his tone shifted, and he revealed something that hit me like a thunderbolt. Harold had found love!

“Nasabtan na nako karon, bay (*I finally understand now*),” he said, his voice filled with a warmth I could almost feel despite the distance. “Nindota gyod diay sa feeling bay kon mahigugma ug higugmaon, hilabi na kon giisip tang tinuod nga babaye sa usa ka lalaki (*It really feels good when we are in love and loved, especially when we are treated like a real woman by a man*).”

Harold often confided in me about the gifts he showered upon his beloved: shoes, cellphones, jeans, T-shirts, and many other tokens of affection. Yet, I lost count of the nights he called me in tears, devastated by the relentless cycle of love that seemed to slip through his fingers. What price do some gay people have to pay to maintain their relationships? Despite the heartache, Harold continued to seek love in every fleeting encounter.

I discovered that hermit crabs also require significant effort to sustain a relationship. They emerge from their shells only when it feels safe enough, exposing their softest parts for a fleeting promise of connection. This seems to hold true for humans in general. Aren't we willing to give a part of ourselves for love?

When I was in my final year of studying, I was surprised to see Harold return to Dakdak one day. However, it wasn't his presence that made the headlines, but the passage of the free tuition law. Despite my repeated encouragement for him to pursue a degree in education, he refused, as he had noticed that many of our relatives struggled to secure teaching positions with the Department of Education. Instead, Harold chose to enroll in a degree related to fisheries, believing he could make a difference by helping our local fisherfolk.

Harold seemed to blossom in ways I had never seen before since he got home. There was a newfound brightness in his eyes, a spark that radiated from his very being. He confidently wore vibrant lipstick, making it an essential part of his daily routine before stepping out. Every step he took was infused with a boldness that made his hips sway in an unmistakable rhythm. What was even more reassuring was the thought that he never again slipped on something inside their CR, as no bruises could longer be seen on his face, legs, or back.

Harold organized several initiatives, including clean-up drives, outreach programs, and feeding programs outside of school. I participated in all his activities. However, everything changed when he developed a fever one day. The fever persisted for a week without any relief. When he recovered, the weight he had lost was very noticeable. As weeks went by, the fever returned, and Harold's eyes and skin began to appear jaundiced during this time.

I still remember what happened that August night. It was the town fiesta, and I invited Harold over despite his illness. Old friends and acquaintances gathered, sharing stories, enjoying food, and sipping cans of beer. In that gathering, Harold was the only one who didn't drink. Then someone in the group asked a question that made us burst into laughter.

*“Kadaot na man nimo, Day? Pa-HIV test kaha (Why are you so sickly, Sis? You should consider getting tested for HIV).”*

Harold walked away from the group silently, and I quickly followed him. To be honest, the remark wasn't particularly significant, as that kind of joke had become common among us. But I realized the timing was inappropriate. The night ended without a word between us.

After a few weeks, blisters appeared all over his body. During this time, I facilitated an HIV symposium, and free testing was offered at our school. I invited Harold to attend. He responded by yelling, “Ingon ana na lang ba gyod ko kahugaw (*Do you really think that I am dirty*)?!” With a deep sigh, I explained that it was simply an invitation and that I had no ill intentions. But my words didn't ease his feelings at that moment.

Months passed, and Harold faced serious bowel issues. He was rushed to our district hospital for evaluation, which included an examination of his blisters. Afterward, the doctor provided a prescription, and he returned home the same day. The

next morning, as the sun began to rise over the rugged shoreline of Dakdak, Harold came to my house and woke me up. He had a request, but I didn't fully understand it at first.

"Unsa bay (*What did you say*)?" I asked.

Harold wanted to get tested for the virus, so we wandered around our town. First, we inquired at the district hospital, then we visited our school, and finally checked the private clinics. Unfortunately, we were unable to secure a test. Days passed, and the blisters turned into sores. It was during this time that he was taken to a tertiary hospital in the city.

I called Harold during his first week in the hospital, but it was his mother who answered the phone. I learned that some diagnostic tests had already been completed: he had pneumonia, and his CD4 count was as low as 12 cells per cubic millimeter. I then asked my cousin to accompany me to the city. We left Dakdak early in the morning on a motorcycle, navigating the long, bumpy roads for four hours. We arrived at the hospital just before noon and discovered that Harold was confined to a room in the north district wing. When we entered the ward, I couldn't hold back my tears. Harold looked so frail; his skin seemed to be the only thing holding his bones together, and the blisters on his body had developed into large, pus-filled sores.

It was a Monday when Harold returned home to Dakdak, two weeks after his admission. It was his personal decision, and he had to sign hospital waivers to make it happen. Each time I visited him in the evening, Harold would invite me to join him for novena prayers. He had a small booklet as a reference for the prayers, with the last page indicating the timing for the final bead of the rosary. But on the second day, my tears fell silently. Because it was no longer Harold's voice that I heard; instead, it was the voice of a mananabtan – someone who prays for the dead.

Friday was the day I cried my heart out, as if my tears could reverse everything that had happened. In the morning, Harold texted me that he had something important to share. After my class, I went straight to his house. It was dusk when I arrived, and when I opened the door to his room, Harold greeted me with a smile I will never forget.

“Bay, palihog ko sa akong tambal (*Could you please hand me my meds?*)” he asked, pointing to a bottle on top of a cabinet. The bottle was white, and Harold knew that I would read its label.

*Not for sale. For HIV/AIDS patients only.*

“Mao ba ni imong iingon kanako (*Is this what you wanted to share with me?*)” My eyes were welling up with tears.

Harold initially responded with a faint smile. He then expressed that perhaps it is true that someone like him has no place in heaven, as it is reserved for those who have forgiven their sins. He further asserted that, as a gay person, he often felt like a walking sin in the eyes of some people. Harold even implored me to write his story, “Kana kon dili na sala ang magpakatinuod sa kaugalingon (*But only if the time comes when it is no longer seen as a sin to be true to oneself*).” I wanted to disagree with him, but the news of his illness was too overwhelming.

A mix of voices crowded my mind that night: regret, thoughts of not helping him enough, and the shame of being an irresponsible friend. I lamented all the missed opportunities. If only I had encouraged him again and again to get tested earlier, Harold might not have come to this point.

Harold even stressed that he would rather slide up and down the rainbow than go to heaven because he believed that, “Ang tanang adunay kalagot sa mga bayot anaa sa langit (*Everyone who harbors hatred toward gay people is present in heaven*).” He smiled at me when he said that all those who have been true to themselves are in the rainbow. And all those who are willing to love and accept gay people are there, too. Harold also reminded me about the Habagat season: our sigay sessions, the heavy downpour after the windstorm, and the rainbow that follows.

Heaven remains an abstract concept and continues to be debated today. However, viewing a rainbow as a sort of heaven is incredibly reassuring because it is within our sight.

“Nalipay kaayo ko, Bay, nga nakaila tika. Hinaot mahinumdoman ko nimo kon makakita kag rainbow. Naa ra ko diha, mopakpak sa imong mga makab-ot (*I’m so grateful to have met you in this lifetime. Know that I am up in the rainbow, clapping for your achievements*),” as Harold hugged me tightly.

Harold discovered the virus too late. It was beyond the point where he could confront it with the care that comes from early awareness. I keep thinking: if only he hadn’t grown up believing that his truth needed to be hidden or regarded as a sickness. He might still be here. He might be thriving, managing the virus like many others do now with proper medication and support. But he spent too long inside that shell, and hermit crabs die if they don’t find a new place to grow.

He was once again taken to the city, where he spent the last days of his life in the hospital. According to his father, he looked for me. When his body was brought home to Dakdak, nobody dared to carry his coffin but us, his childhood playmates. Only a few people attended his funeral because our neighborhood had learned about the virus. We spent two years on contact tracing, but the individual carrying the virus might still be out there, alone and in need of support.

There is a particular ache I feel every time I watch hermit crabs crawl into shells that do not belong to them. It reminds me of Harold, and how he slipped in and out of lives he never felt he was allowed to claim.

It has been nearly six years. No one collects sigay in Dakdak anymore. Lola Bebe no longer creates sigay chandeliers, and Nanay Rosalie no longer whistles us home. Some things return with the waves, while others do not.

The sky is now painted in shades of gray as relentless downpours follow each windstorm. There's a certain truth that this is nature's way of cleansing her burdens, like tears in familiar weather. I think of Harold, no longer living like a hermit crab, just as he once did when the sigay gleamed in his hands. He once said that those who are true to themselves don't wait for heaven, but they slide across the rainbow instead. As I finish writing this, a rainbow peeks through my window.

THE HABAGAT SEASON HAS FINALLY ARRIVED.

End.