

# THE GIRL WHO LEARNED TO KNEEL

Fiona Alison Duncan

You don't have to keep a diary to reveal your innards in words. Curt snaps at service workers; whispering secrets in kids' ears; name dropping in the company of cool strangers; or bringing up an old fight after receiving good news. How in love we say their names repeatedly. And call them 'you'. Hey, *you*. Or when we'd say *Mother* to Mom. 'Fuck you!' to Dad. Attention seeking. Humblebrags, borrowed slang, and judgments; what we speak of unprompted, obsessively; what we'll only share if prompted; where we stumble; when we sound rehearsed; defensive, aggressive, spinning. Language is so revealing!

We may never know what got Etty Hillesum into psychotherapy, and keeping a diary, in 1941. A Dutch Jew, born Esther, the eldest of three siblings, from Middelburg, she was then living in Amsterdam, in front of the Rijksmuseum. 27 years old. She'd studied law before switching to Slavonic languages and psychology. A Jungian psycho-chirologist (a student of hands) named Julius Spear is treating Etty when her diaries, and our knowledge of her, begin. Sunday, March 9, 1941. 'Here goes, then,' she goes:

This is a painful and well-nigh insuperable step for me: yielding up so much that has been suppressed to a blank sheet of lined

paper. The thoughts in my head are sometimes so clear and so sharp and my feelings so deep, but writing about them comes hard. The main difficulty, I think, is a sense of shame. So many inhibitions, so much fear of letting go, of allowing things to pour out of me, and yet that is what I must do if I am ever to give my life a reasonable and satisfactory purpose. It is like the final, liberating scream that always sticks bashfully in your throat when you make love.

Etty Hillesum lived a few blocks from Anne Frank. They both died in Nazi camps, Anne at Bergen-Belsen at 15, and Etty at Auschwitz, six weeks before her 30th birthday.

'I am accomplished in bed,' she writes. This is why, it's been suggested, Etty Hillesum's diaries aren't, like those of her younger neighbor, part of the Holocaust canon. (Almost no one's heard of Etty Hillesum, not Ariela, Sylvère, Margaret, or Alexa – specialists of this history; I asked.) Hillesum journaled for 2 years and 3 months. In her first entry, she boasts of being, 'just about seasoned enough I should think to be counted among the better lovers.' She was then sleeping with the man she was living with, Han Wegerif, a widower of sixty-two.

Soon, Etty would be sleeping with her therapist, Julius Spear, or 'S', as she calls him, too. Etty was, 'of course', she writes, 'erotically receptive in all directions; to S's demonic mouth, to Liesl's trim little figure and waving blond hair, no less than

to this girl, this boy, I don't know what to call her, with her slim and lively boy's face' – one of Etty's students. Etty was a Russian tutor. And a mystic. Zen-ish, and ecstatic. And this is why, I suspect, her diaries aren't more popular.

Etty Hillesum's mysticism has been likened to that of Simone Weil. Both women were born Jewish in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, and both found, or were divinely drawn toward, Christian ethics and spirit. Simone, who was older by five years, and more studied (precocious), and more in the world – freer to travel to Germany, Italy, and Spain from her home of France – was more exact in her religiosity. Or, she wrote more precisely of her love of God, Christ, and Francis of Assisi (and the Upanishads, Mahayana Buddhism, the Greek mysteries...). Etty's 'God' is 'ultimate mystery'. She addresses 'Him' as 'You'. While she loves reading the Psalms (and Rilke and Jung), Etty's God is experiential in persuasion. She prays. Like Simone Weil, Etty Hillesum writes of being *compelled to her knees* in prayer. Forces beyond them got them there. For Simone, it was, 'alone in the little twelfth-century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, an incomparable marvel of purity where Saint Francis often used to pray'. For Etty, 'the rough coconut matting in an untidy bathroom' in her and Han's home.

From 1941 to 1943, Etty will return to that coconut matting and to her knees. The first time: 'I suddenly went down on my knees... Almost automatically. Forced to the ground by something stronger than myself.' Shortly after, she writes: 'The story of the girl who gradually learned

to kneel is something I would love to write in the fullest possible way.' And she goes on to. Her diaries document an inner transformation – from obstinate, frustrated, willful self-obsession (suffocatingly assertive prose) to poetry, insight, and grace; her finding God within herself.



Brant recommended Etty's diaries to me. A few years ago, when he and I mostly talked about science fiction, the Long Now, and fashion, he said I should read this mid-20th-century, Dutch woman's personal writing. He'd read her in an undergraduate Religious Studies class called *Self and Other*, and I guess he was reading me, too. Back then, I was publishing yearning essays online, like many young women: violent, introspective, curious, and confused. By the time I bought *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum*, I'd started on 'my mystic trip – a healing journey', having recognized that I'd in been in pain, and was acting out, maybe unnecessarily? I'd tried it on, and I couldn't pull it off, so I was over the glamor of the suffering woman; martyr Marilyn, lonely Gilda, Catherine Breillat's luxury masochists, the sad Internet girl. I sensed that a different mode of independent femininity was possible for me, and it would come from inner work.

I wanted to realize this: the ease I discerned in people I'd started to meet, or notice. The buoyancy of me before puberty! I was studying the Tao, and Zen via Alan Watts, and zeitgeist diseases care of Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, and psychological astrology. That's when I ordered Etty – after I'd left New York and its distractions. Became

single, nunnish. Barely worked, was broke, and so open to dependence, the kindness of others. Homeless, bumming around, *having fun*. Phone-free. I learned to breathe. This is like, a constellation of three years. 27-28-29. Ety traveled with me, though I didn't read her alltheway through until very recently. I found her difficult, insufferable, actually. In her early entries, she was too much like me, knowing:

I still take myself too seriously.

All I need do is to 'be', to live  
and try being a little bit human.

One can't control everything with the brain;  
must allow one's emotions and intuitions  
free play as well.

Yes, we women, we foolish, idiotic,  
illogical women, we all seek Paradise and  
the Absolute. And yet my brain, my capable  
brain, tells me that there are no absolutes,  
that everything is relative, endlessly  
diverse, and in eternal motion, and  
it is precisely for that reason that life  
is so exciting and fascinating, but also  
so very, very painful. We women want  
to perpetuate ourselves in a man.

I did. I'd consistently dated, from 19 to 27, boys  
I wanted to be. I was vampiric, sucking up their  
confidence and knowledge until *I got it*, then leaving  
them for a next victim. Whatever. I was also an  
overeater, and an overpleaser, addicted to smoking,

fashion, new friends, sugar, and to my computer; base pleasures, self-soothers. Totally common. And not wanting to be. I wanted to be an artist, a messenger of truth, love, and beauty (and recognized and beloved for it), though I couldn't admit it.

The 'I' is an illusive mechanism. It's targeted, singular, and persuasive. I can say all the above, while recognizing that it's not all that was going on. During my vampiric twenties, I I I I was also very sweet and shy, supporting my boyfriends, emotionally and professionally, and maybe being taken advantage of? (Also, really loving them.) I was embarrassing myself *or* learning to write, getting intimate with, through public trial, the limits and magic (s-p-e-l-l-i-n-g! etymology, *echomimesis*) of language. And I was exhausting old trauma, or karma – my own, from childhood; and that of my family, down the line; and that of womankind (I confused allyship and sisterhood with empathetically hurting, as women historically have).

Songs I didn't want were always getting stuck in my head. Insults laid my way were another refrain. Advil would've been on my budget, had I kept a budget; I swallowed handfuls of them weekly without ever questioning why my head hurt, and I spent money as if with my eyes closed. I flew first class to Paris. And once to Mexico with 60 US dollars and two maxed credit cards to my name. I met hundreds of people, felt alienated. Ignored death, was obsessed with death. Had glorious sex, annihilating sex, boring sex, selfish sex, learned to make love with myself. I was married. Crushed. I said 'no' for years. 'Yes' for more. And whenever Monique suggested using it, I'd reply,

*But what do you mean, 'intuition'?* I wore every height of heel, and many lengths of hair, and once when 'I' felt most 'like dying' – (I'd burned through so many belief systems), 'I'm nothing' – this couple who I'd known *for years* didn't recognize me in the grocery store, even after I said 'hi' and then my name, and then all the places we knew each other from. They looked terrified when they finally realized which Fiona I was referring to. Thank God! It took years of learning to forget everything I thought we knew in order to get to my truth.



Why write? Who are we writing to? What for? Etty's diaries, initially, read like she's writing to S, who encouraged her to start. There's this self-conscious, seductive, need to prove. Etty revered S.

At the outset, Etty writes little of her social and political circumstance. She notes rumors of Jews being gassed abroad. The Gestapo move in. Yellow stars are doled out. She loses the right to ride her bicycle around town. These details are background. Etty writes mostly about her inner life, as she is convinced, as she relates saying to a friend on February 19, 1942:

I see no other solution, I really see no other solution than to turn inward and to root out all the rottenness there. I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves. And that seems to me the only lesson to be learned from this war. That we must look into ourselves and nowhere else.

Etty was 28 by then. She'd started to notice – maybe thanks to her diary, tracking dates – how her misery was aligned with her menstrual cycle. 'Remarkable,' she writes, 'this connection between certain moods and menstruation':

My chemical composition suddenly changes, and I don't feel responsible any longer... there are also sudden bursts of creativity, but above all there is despair, so much despair at not being able to express any of the many vague and unclear things inside me.

It is my experience that through one's twenties, a female sexed body will feel its hormonal rhythms more and more intensely, and that, once this is understood, one can learn to flow with this productively, even pleasurably. Because what it is, is heightened sensitivity, a more corporeal and emotional register. While I may not be as able to execute thought rationally, to perform order as the patriarchal world tends to reward it, I can, at certain times of the month, intuit more accurately, savor food and touch more sensuously, and orgasm with a depth like necessity. I can also be irritable, taking noise and brutality personally. *This is not a world to bring a child into.* This cycle happens so repeatedly (by 27, a 'regular' woman will have experienced something like 200 plus periods), one learns, ideally, to self-nurture.



Etty got everything she asked for. In her diaries, early on, she wishes for S as a lover, and to be peaceful,

simple, a writer. 'Oh, Lord,' she writes, 'let me feel at one with myself, let me perform a thousand daily tasks with love.' She asks for, 'wisdom, not knowledge', 'true happiness', and to storytell 'the girl who could not kneel'. A year later, she'll pen:

... it is as if my body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling. Sometimes, in a moment of deep gratitude, kneeling down becomes an overwhelming urge, head deeply bowed, hands before my face.

It is around then – early 1942 – that Etty's diaries get really good. She starts noting externals more:

... a day of gaiety, neglect of duty, and sunshine. I played truant along the canals, and crouched in a corner of his room facing his bed. There were five tea roses in a small tin vase.

She starts to have, with S, what sounds like Tantric sex:

Not just out of sensuality but also from a desire to breathe from one moment through a single mouth... so that a single breath passes through both.

She gets wise:

That fear of missing out on things makes you miss out on everything.

And real:

Airplanes, streaking down in flames, still have a weird fascination for us – ever aesthetically – though we know, deep down, that human beings are being burned alive.

Etty never asked to be saved.



My 'mystic trip' paralleled that of many girlfriends. 'We're all leveling up at the same time!' Michelle exclaimed. I would theorize that *it's the dawn of the Age of Aquarius*, and that Etty Hillesum was an early Aquarian heroine. 'You would,' Durga would say, and I could *feel* how it was loving. The more I stilled my inner state, the more there was to sense. The more solitary I got, the less lonely I felt. I started meeting co-conspirators, good friends. Women like Aja, who loves Jesus, makes direct asks of the universe, and seems to get what she wants. And Sojourner, tender of gardens, a generative painter.

Anna was my closest soul sister, the one I'd story my journey to. I think, because our exchanges were always miraculously shame-free. Anna J. Soldner doesn't, like me, take what people say all that seriously. We appreciate how often people don't mean what they say. 'Hello there, Mr. Mind!' Anna would say in a loud, metallic tone whenever she heard programmatic communication, especially her own. Our goal was *to live from the heart*. ('All real communication comes from the heart,' Etty said.) We laughed a lot, like 'lolololo10101010lolol.' Our inner cosmic joke.

It felt like a trend, though I also recognize I've a mind for trend – but people have been getting more spiritual, no? More into astrology, mysticism, Big Picturing, self-healing. Because what else is there to do? For me, circa 2015, it was a necessity. Consensus Reality in the U.S.A. was too violent, too plastic, hard. Trump hadn't yet made his bid for office, and I was already calling the scene *fascist*. The fascism of *isms*. Neoliberalism, racism, sexism, *conceptualism*. Ideology organizing the day-to-day. Our obligation to work to live, and too few discernible opportunities to do so healthily. It seemed to me like you either had to be born rich, its own curse, or act selfish, steal, and fake it – that that was what was rewarded. Also: Chelsea Manning. In prison. Guantánamo: still open. Bill Cosby. Ew. My imagination was stretched the world over, day after day, reading the news.

Maybe it is a collective phenomenon, a global or generational 'leveling up'. It's hard to say, because it's also so deeply personal. 'Is there indeed anything as intimate,' Etty Hillesum writes, 'as man's relationship to God?' She admits feeling embarrassed (I do, too) spelling out beliefs – 'Much more bashful than if I had to write about my love life.'

This is maybe why, even between us, once it started really happening, Anna and I didn't say much. 'Everything's changed...', 'I feel...', 'It's really real!' 'I know.' 'Me too.'

'There is a vast silence in me,' Etty wrote, 'that continues to grow.'



Was Etty Hillesum's turning toward God  
a coping mechanism?

'There are few illusions left to us,' she writes in early 1942. 'Life is going to be very hard [...] We shall have to steel ourselves inwardly more and more.' A few months later: 'The threat grows ever greater, and terror increases from day to day.' (Food was rationed; barred from transport systems, she had to walk everywhere wearing a star, her feet were always blistered, people disappeared.) 'I draw prayer round me like a protective wall, withdraw inside it as one might into a convent cell and then step outside again, calmer and stronger and more collected again.'



When I finally read Etty to the end, it was like reading Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, another book I'd lugged around for years, until one day I felt ready for it, and read it like it was it. Had I not already had the experiences I'd had – of divine union, transcendent, sober and sobering visitations, the most pleasurable bliss unimaginable, still, and recurrent, the more and more I surrender to it – I probably wouldn't have read underlining all I did.

My religiosity – because it feels that *serious*, that necessary to *practice* – is, like Etty's and Simone's, self-taught, a synthesis of independent study and experience, and, at the same time it feels, providential? Knowing God – the feeling behind the word, and I find God in words – is... well, it's given me the sense that it'd be totally fine to die, which really helps one

live. It's like, genuinely not giving a fuck in the way we say that now, like not tripping over bullshit. Loving 'I'm nothing', while knowing you belong. There's room for you in the world, because you know how to go inside. ('I repose in myself,' Etty wrote, 'and that part of myself, that deepest and richest part in which I repose, is what I call "God."') It's peaceful in here, free, tender, and sad. ('Whenever I showed myself ready to bear it' – she really got it – 'the hard was directly transformed into the beautiful.')



Etty Hillesum accepted, early, what she called 'her destiny' – to die in the camps with her friends and family. Despite loved ones' urgings, she made no attempt to hide or flee. She even volunteered at Westerbork transit camp, where she worked for a month with the Social Welfare for People in Transit department, shuttling neighbors into crowded trains destined for Poland and Germany. Later, she would be conscripted as an internee at that camp along with her parents and younger brother. On September 7, 1943, they were deported to Auschwitz, and all died within two months.

Just because you feel it's fine to die, doesn't mean you should pursue it. Simone Weil also pretty much did herself in. Already sickly, in London, in 1943 – one history has it – Weil limited her food consumption to what she believed German-occupied French residents were then eating, and died of starvation.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

I wonder if Etty had asked to be saved, if she'd written it into her diary as she did her wishes to be happy, wise, poetic, in love, with S, if she would've lived, cause she got the rest. Etty believed it was her duty to support and to soothe others. And, 'to accept it and to know there is no answer. That we must be able to bear Your mysteries.' Among her last entries, she calls for the destruction of:

... the ideas behind which life lies imprisoned as behind bars... We have to rid ourselves of all preconceptions, of all slogans, of all sense of security... Then you liberate your true life, its real mainsprings, and then you will also have the strength to bear real suffering, your own and the world's...

But wasn't suffering – along with passion (*patri*, endurance) and *altruism*, *selflessness*, and *sacrifice*, *martyrdom* – an ideal of the religions Etty and Weil studied?

[These people think pain is noble, their bodies learn to believe the lies their minds repeat over and over for generations. Harmony Holiday, *Hollywood Forever*, 2017]

Imagine what she, having written herself free, resilient and graceful, might've lived to create instead.