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## Features

### Escape From the Holy Shtetl

**Gitty Grunwald fled the pious world of her mother to return to the secular city of her grandparents. There's only one problem: The Satmars kept her daughter. A family saga of four generations of American Jews.**

- By [Mark Jacobson](#)
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A more typical American scene would be hard to imagine: a young mother and her daughter in Wal-Mart. Yet as she pushed the shopping cart with the 4-year-old Esther Miriam sitting, princesslike, in the child's

seat, Sterna Gittel Grunwald (call her Gitty), her five-one frame nicely defined in snug black jeans and white cotton shirt, kept an eye out for spies.

The Satmar Hasidim from Kiryas Joel, the Catskill village where the now-23-year-old Gitty grew up, only came to Wal-Mart for the big sales. There was something about the store's dizzying display of cheesy American choice that made the townspeople nervous, Gitty thought. But still, in KJ, you could never be too paranoid.

Once, when Esther Miriam was a baby, Gitty took her for a walk. "A guy looked into the carriage," Gitty recalls. "He said how cute Esther Miriam was and went on his way.

"It was nice. But then these three minivans come tearing down the street. Hasids jump out and surround me, screaming, 'Who was that guy? What did he want?'"

It was the Vaad Hatznius, Kiryas Joel's "moral police," whom Gitty refers to as "those stupid Talibans." Mostly, the Vaads write down the license plates of people who drive on Shabbos and note which women enter the Landau supermarket with their legs insufficiently covered. But if someone ratted on you, the Vaads might come to your house to see if you were watching porn on that DVD hidden under the bed. In Kiryas Joel, Gitty says, they think there's no reason to have a DVD except to watch porn.

"They call it the holy *shtetl*," Gitty said, rolling her matchless pale-green eyes as she talks about her former hometown, where the streets are named for famous rabbis and European Hasidic settlements. When KJ was founded in 1977 by the Satmar grand rebbe Joel Teitelbaum—Kiryas Joel means Joel's Village in Yiddish—holiness was the goal. Like Moses before him, Rebbe Teitelbaum had led the Satmars from the shadow of Auschwitz to the Williamsburg promised land, where they thrived, becoming the largest Hasidic sect in the world.

But Williamsburg could be noisy and cruel, with the thrum of the BQE and Puerto Ricans on the street. Kiryas Joel, an incorporated village within the town of Monroe 50 miles up the Thruway, would be a sanctuary. In Kiryas Joel, a Jew could live as he did in eighteenth-century Europe, where the great sage the Baal Shem Tov first articulated the mystic, ecstatic path to G-d that would evolve into modern-day Hasidism. Here, a scholar could think of nothing but Torah amid the bounty of Creation.

Only 3 when her mother, Deborah, a former hippie and the child of secular New York Jews, first came to KJ as a *bal tshuva*, or Jew returning to orthodoxy, Gitty would reach her late teens before she realized she was living in perhaps the most religiously conservative community in America. "In my parents' house, there's no TV, no radio, no newspapers not in Yiddish, no Internet," Gitty says. "We weren't supposed to pay any attention to the outside world." Indeed, even today, a year and a half after fleeing KJ, in one short conversation, Gitty evidenced unfamiliarity with Che Guevara, Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, Dolly Parton, and Keith Richards.

It was only after her arranged marriage, at age 17, to Joel—nicknamed Yoely—Grunwald, another Kiryas Joel teenager, who would become Esther Miriam's father, that Gitty knew "I couldn't live in KJ anymore, that I didn't want to be one of those women who pop out babies every eighteen months and think whatever their husbands tell them to ... When Esther Miriam was born, that raised the stakes, because now there were two of us. Two KJ girls."

In early 2007, Gitty fled Kiryas Joel for good, taking Esther Miriam with her. At first, they lived in the

relatively relaxed *frum* (Orthodox) community of Monsey, New York, then moved to Brooklyn. “It was just the two of us. I loved it,” Gitty says. Then in January of this year, as Esther Miriam was walked with her class to a Flatbush playground, she was taken, says Gitty, who believes her husband was behind the act.

“Some KJ guys snatched her off the street. Esther Miriam said they were wearing masks. All she remembers was crying, crying so hard,” Gitty says, calling it the worst day of her life. “When they told me what happened, I couldn’t breathe. I felt like I was being suffocated. I still do.”

Since then, Esther Miriam has been in KJ, at times in the house of Yoely’s parents, as Gitty works through the courts, both secular and rabbinical, to try to regain custody of her daughter. For the time being, Gitty says, “Yoely calls the shots, when I can see my daughter and where.” That’s why Gitty was nervous taking Esther Miriam to Wal-Mart. Yoely had decreed the store off-limits.

[Next: The first time Gitty saw her husband.](#)



Beelining through the toy department, Gitty halted in front of the towering Play-Doh display, hastily tossing three packages of the *faux* clay into the steel-mesh cart. The \$30 cost, added to the \$20 price of the already picked-out Barbie, would clean out Gitty for the week, but there was little choice. She was desperate to get Esther Miriam *something*. Gitty hadn’t seen her daughter for almost three weeks, and the way things were going, she didn’t know when she’d see her again.

Turning from the Play-Doh, Esther Miriam began admiring a pair of pink ballet slippers. This was a problem, since in KJ pink ballet slippers are not considered appropriate for little girls, who wear navy-blue or black flats. Such shoes are in keeping with the community’s idea of *tznius*, or modesty. In KJ, where it is considered a disaster for a man to see a woman’s uncovered hair, Esther Miriam’s wearing pink ballet

slippers could be tantamount to a *chilul hashem*, an affront to G-d.

“Know what Esther Miriam told me?” Gitty railed. “If G-d sees you with your legs uncovered, you go to hell. She’s 4 years old, worrying about hell! My own daughter!”

This was how it was in KJ, Gitty said, where even your parents would turn on you if you weren’t religious enough. Gitty points to what happened when she went to the *beth din*, the Satmar rabbinical court, trying to win custody of Esther Miriam.

“Big chance I had,” Gitty declared. “My mother and stepfather wouldn’t support me. So there I am, this silly little irreligious girl, all by myself. I’d been brought up to revere these rabbis. And they’re looking at me like I’m a goy. Worse than a goy, because I’m trying to take a Jewish girl away from the religion. In KJ, they think I’ll turn Esther Miriam into a prostitute. They tell her I’m dead.”

Still, it didn’t pay to give Yoely any more ammunition. So, no: Esther Miriam would not get her ballet slippers. “Tateh,” Gitty said to Esther Miriam, using the Yiddish familiar term for daddy, as she placed the slippers back on the shelf, “wouldn’t like it.”

After Wal-Mart, the plan was for Gitty to drop Esther Miriam at Hershey’s Auto, where Yoely Grunwald sells many of KJ’s ubiquitous minivans and SUVs. Gitty was due by 6:30 but was running late. This was a problem because it was Friday afternoon. At sunset, an hour away now, a siren would sound throughout the town announcing the arrival of Shabbos. At this point, all everyday activity in KJ would cease.

By KJ’s main shopping center, spring rain falling, the urgency was obvious. Rushing to prepare for the holiday, dozens of vans jockeyed for position amid the puddles in the parking lot, taillights flashing wildly, horns permanently engaged.

“Shit. They’re making us late,” Gitty said, offering a running commentary on Satmar driving etiquette, which, like all Hasidic social skills, she believes, is nonexistent.

The fact is KJ is simply too crowded for two-lane roads and dinky parking lots. As anyone driving in Midwood or Kew Gardens knows, the exploding *haredi* population has extended far beyond the familiar boundaries of Crown Heights and Williamsburg. Everywhere you look is a black hat, the various sects named for their town of origin, the Bobov from Bobowa in the former Galicia, the Belz from Belz in Ukraine—and the Satmars from Satu Mare, in present-day Romania—each group with their dynastically determined rebbe and variation on basic Hasidic dress.

Still, Kiryas Joel stands alone. Over the past six years, this self-contained village, where families with ten children are not unusual, has been one of the fastest-growing communities of its size in New York State, with one of the youngest median ages (15). Rebbe Teitelbaum’s vision of a bucolic retreat has dissolved in the boomtown sprawl of nearly identical four-story aluminum-sided condos off the north end of the 208 exit off Route 17. Every day, buses make the run to Williamsburg, a curtain down the middle aisle to separate the men from the women.

By the time Gitty reached Hershey’s Auto, it was pouring. Yoely, a bearded, vaguely paunchy man in his middle twenties, was pacing the car lot, his white shirt soaked and sticking to his stomach. When he saw Gitty, he jabbed his finger toward his watch.

Gitty will never forget the moment she first laid eyes on Yoely Grunwald.

She was past her 17th birthday when her parents told her they had arranged for her marriage. “Can’t I see him first?” Gitty asked. “Sure,” they said, “look out the window.”

“He was walking down the street with a rabbi beside him. He was looking down, so I couldn’t see his face. He walked around a minute, then turned around and walked away. Everyone said, ‘Okay, you saw him.’”

[Next: The secular, liberal, New York Jew pedigree of Gitty's family.](#)



In the parking lot, the passage of child from parent to parent took place almost without comment. Gitty handed over the Play-Doh. Esther Miriam got out of the car. Gitty wanted to get out, too, give her daughter one more kiss, but she couldn’t. She was wearing pants. For a KJ man to see a KJ woman wearing pants is a terrible thing, one more violation of *tznius*. In a moment, Yoely had the little girl in his arms and was making his way to his car.

“I love you, Esther Miriam. Mommy loves you,” Gitty shouted as the waving child and father disappeared into the crowd of Satmars scurrying through the rain.

Gitty sat staring at the rise and fall of the windshield wipers, “more or less numb.” She had been raised to be a Satmar woman, and she remains one to a large degree. Satmar women are supposed to be tough. You couldn’t expect some delicate flower to have eight or nine babies by the time she turned 30. Several of Gitty’s classmates are already on their fourth kid.

Gitty was tough. Through the depressing court appearances, each time Yoely’s mother hung up on her when

she called to talk to Esther Miriam, Gitty kept it together. But like the KJ women Gitty says were quietly going crazy bearing all those children, she found there was a time when toughness became numbness. It was something you had to fight against.

“Leaving KJ cost me a lot. It cost me my daughter,” Gitty finally said, the rain beating down on the car roof. “But I’m going to get her back.”

Right then, Gitty’s eyes fell to a container of Pringles on the car floor. Gitty bought the chips for Esther Miriam in Wal-Mart, noting the OUD on the label, which means the Orthodox Union had certified the product as “kosher dairy.” During their marriage, Gitty and Yoely fought about whether OUD was kosher enough. Yoely said no, because OUD did not positively guarantee that any milk used was obtained by Jewish hands. When he saw the OUD on the Pringles can, Yoely dropped it like it was hot.

Gitty looked mournfully at the chips. “Esther Miriam really wanted those Pringles,” she said.

If you call Gitty’s grandparents, Matty and Carol Feinman, New York Jews, they do not object. “We’re Jews. We live in New York. What else should we be?” asks Carol Feinman, still wry and sassy in her eighties as she sits in the Feinmans’ typically rambling Washington Heights apartment.

The Feinmans’ secular, intellectual, liberal, mordantly humorous New York Jew pedigree is pure, with a bohemian tilt. Matty, also in his eighties, got kicked out of Brooklyn Tech, joined the Navy, came back to New York, got his teacher’s license, and taught at Music and Art high school when it used to be on Convent Avenue in Harlem and was, as any early-sixties boy will tell you, home to the coolest (Jewish and otherwise) girls in the city. Now legally blind, Matty still paints every day—he’s especially interested in Photoshopping abstract images—in his studio that juts out over Riverside Drive. “Trying to make something to look at, every day, that’s it, for me,” Matty says.

For years, Carol Feinman did PR work downtown for “big-shot musicians,” including Ella Fitzgerald. A singer herself, Carol still dresses up to perform at open-mike nights on Bleecker Street, doing mostly Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan standards.

Cut from a similar cloth of New York Jew-dom, I recognize, and embrace, people like Matty and Carol Feinman. And, like the Feinmans, I remember when it was an event to see a Hasid, even in Brooklyn.

Back in the middle to late fifties, as my parents and I drove up Eastern Parkway to visit my grandparents, should a Hasid pass by, my mother rarely failed to comment. “What is with these getups, aren’t they hot? ... Don’t they know this isn’t Poland? It’s enough to make you *plotz*,” she’d say.

“What business is it of yours what they do?” rejoined my father, never one for extended conversations.

This was barely a decade after the war, before the word *Holocaust*, with the big H, had become commonplace. My father fought in the Battle of the Bulge, he was in Patton’s Third Army, which later liberated Buchenwald. He *knew*. But it wasn’t anything you wanted to talk about, especially to your snot-nose son. Better he should roam carefree in the vacant lots of Flushing, a little *pisher* with a Ted Kluszewski mitt, unfettered by memory’s chokehold. Who needed these musty Kafka characters, dragging behind them the heavy chains of history?

But there was also a pride—a civic/ethnic/fuck-the-Nazis pride—in the presence of these ragtag scholars,

clutching their prayer books in front of the Loew's Kameo Theatre. Here in New York—our New York!—a Jew would always be safe. So what if they screwed like bunnies through a hole in a sheet? Wasn't the world a little short of Jews at the moment? Besides, someone had to think about G-d all the time, even here, in this new land of two-car garages, baseball, and Reform temples.

[Next: How her mother came to join the Hasidic movement.](#)



Now, however, with their real-estate wealth, bloc-voting political power, and sheer numbers, the Hasidic expansion suggests a question. With the fracture of the old-time-liberal, Democratic-voting, Chinese-food-eating, Alfred Kazin–Norman Mailer–Woody Allen–style intellectual, pre-*Seinfeld* New York Jew—you don't really suppose Mike Bloomberg falls in the same category as Ed Koch or Abe Beame, do you?—could the black hats be the new face of the tribe?

The new New York Jew?

“Over my dead body!” declares Matty Feinman, who wonders if, for all their endless Halacha, the people in Kiryas Joel are even Jews at all, much less from New York. “They're a cult! They don't believe in science. They hate art. They hate literature. They don't pay taxes. For me, to be a Jew is to be curious, compassionate with others. These guys only care about themselves.”

This was something Matty knew from “personal experience.” The Feinmans have three children. Their son is openly gay. The Feinmans are very proud of him. One of their daughters adopted two children of color. The Feinmans love the kids to death. Their other daughter, Gitty's mother, the former Deborah Feinman, joined the Hasidic movement. This has been no end of trouble.

“Deborah is the last person I thought would get involved in this,” says Carol Feinman. “She had such an artistic spirit ... but she’s someone who needs structure. When she first went with the Hasidim, I thought, well, at least they’re Jewish.”

Things went off the track when Deborah brought home Chaim Kalfa, the Lubavitcher who would become Gitty’s father.

“A real beauty, that one. Once, he came in, walked right to the refrigerator, and started throwing things out. I said, ‘What are doing? I just bought that.’ They said it wasn’t kosher. Matty had painted this picture of his friend, a black man, in an undershirt. They wanted us to turn the picture to the wall, that it wasn’t modest. Matty said, ‘Wait a minute, that’s my friend!’”

Matty Feinman picks up the story: “One night, Chaim says to meet him at Columbus Circle so we can settle this once and for all. I went on the subway with a chinning bar stuck into my pants. The cops had to come. The guy was crazy. Violent. Abusive. Last I heard, he was in Israel riding a donkey, yelling about Rebbe Schneerson being Jesus Christ.”

Following the dissolution of her marriage to Chaim, Deborah left the Lubavitchers, taking Gitty and her two siblings to join the austere Satmars in Kiryas Joel, where she married Avrum Schwartz and had three more children.

While thankful the Satmars took Deborah in, Matty saw little improvement. “The Lubavitchers, they have a joy about them. The Satmars are nuts. They tell you the State of Israel shouldn’t exist because the Messiah hasn’t come yet, that the Holocaust was God’s way of punishing Jews for Zionism. It makes you sick.”

Matty and Carol visited their grandchildren in KJ, but it was always an unsettling experience. “Once I got up in the night and turned on the light. I forgot it was Shabbos,” says Carol. “They’re yelling, ‘You turned on the light!’ ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, ‘I’ll turn it off.’ ‘No! Don’t turn it off!’ they screamed. I had to go outside in the dead of winter to flag down one of the cops they hire to do things on Shabbos.”

Carol and Matty were eventually banned from Deborah’s house. On one of their last visits, Matty saw one of Gitty’s young stepbrothers regarding him warily. “The kid says, ‘Dis is a Yid?’ I felt like screaming, ‘Yeah, for 70 goddamn years!’ But it wouldn’t have done any good.”

Gitty’s situation with Esther Miriam has brought back much of Matty’s rage. “They want such big families, but their way of being a Jew has ripped this family apart,” he says. “Deborah has gotten the worst of it.” In the past few years, Gitty’s brother and sister—Chaim’s other two children—have also left KJ. “She’s lost three children because of this.” Now the pain had extended to another generation.

Carol and Matty sigh. No one really wants to go over these sad memories again. Carol Feinman has one last thing to say.

“There was this one Hanukkah,” she says evenly. “We were going to have a party and invited Deborah. I didn’t think she’d come, but she sounded excited about it. I was really hopeful. Then she calls back with a lot of questions about who’s going to be there, if there were going to be any non-Jews. I said, ‘Probably.’ She comes, and everyone is happy to see her ... but at dinner, she doesn’t join us at the table. She’s got her face to the wall, and she’s praying. This is what the Satmar rebbe told her to do if she had to sit down with non-Jews: Face the wall and pray.

[Next: What Deborah thinks about her daughter's decision.](#)



“That’s when I knew I’d lost my daughter. That she was gone.”

Deborah Feinman Schwartz stands on her back porch in Kiryas Joel holding open the kitchen door.

In different circumstances, the two of us, Deborah and me, from the same generation of New York Jews, might have had things to talk about. “She was a real hippie,” Gitty says of her mother. You could see it, too, through the haphazard turban on her head, the blanketlike smock over her shoulders, and red-rimmed eyes: the young Deborah Feinman, getting off the IND at West 4th Street, one of those girls with a guitar and an unavailable look.

Deborah, however, was not of a mind to discuss her life story. Communication came in fits and starts. Once, after hearing Gitty talk about Matty and Carol, Deborah replied, “Sure, Bubbe and Zaidy are great, until they start making you take all those music lessons.” Her parents, Deborah said, “never accepted my path.”

Another time, leaning in the car window, inquiring why a married man of 60 was hanging out with her 23-year-old daughter, Deborah stopped in mid-sentence. “Elvis Presley,” she said. I hadn’t even noticed “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” playing, at low volume, on the iPod.

But right then, Avrum, Gitty’s stepfather, pulled up in his van, stopping all conversation. “See my mother just shut up?” Gitty said later. “She’s under his thumb. She does everything he says.”

My invitation to Deborah’s kitchen was a product of much negotiation. Gitty wanted to come upstairs, but again, in the spirit of her stubborn, unfinished rebellion, she was wearing pants. It was decided that I would

go upstairs, get a skirt, and bring it down so Gitty could modestly walk the 50 steps from the parking lot to the apartment door.

“Wait here,” Deborah said, leaving the room. The Schwartz family kitchen was in a transitional state. Foodstuffs, on their way in or out depending on their “kosher for Passover” status, sat on counters and in open cabinets. Three stoves were arranged at odd angles.

In the adjacent living room was a dark-wood cabinet with a sparse selection of prayer books on the shelves. While her brothers studied Torah at the yeshiva as much as fifteen hours a day, Gitty often did her homework here, memorizing the tenets of concepts like *yichud*, or “aloneness,” such as when it was appropriate for an unmarried Satmar male to be alone in the presence of an unmarried Satmar female.

It was also in school, looking at textbooks with large sections blacked out, that young Satmars learned there was no such thing as evolution, that dinosaur bones are nothing but G-d’s inference of an inaccessible past world, and that stars in the skies are not stars at all but pinpricks of light in a vast scrim placed by G-d for the Jews to gaze upon as they made their passage through the profane world, a world due to expire with the coming of the seventh Hebrew millennium, now 232 years away. Gitty’s formal schooling ended when she became engaged to Yoely. In the KJ tradition, she now was ready to raise a family.

Deborah returned to the kitchen after about fifteen minutes. Making a point of looking around her apartment, the manifestation of her life in KJ, she leveled her gaze at me. “People make choices,” Deborah said, handing me the skirt.

Back at the car, Gitty wanted to know what took so long. Then, she frowned. “My mother hemmed the skirt!” she exclaimed.

You see, Gitty had worn the skirt before. It was long enough to reach the floor, which seemed to fulfill every criteria of *tznius* except one: “I looked good in it,” Gitty said.

“See where my mother hemmed it? At the ugliest possible length this skirt could ever be.” This was the essence of the KJ aesthetic, Gitty said.

Deborah says Gitty’s decision to talk about her life in Kiryas Joel is “the act of a disgruntled, ungrateful kid, someone we tried to help but refused help.” Questioning Gitty’s maturity, Deborah says, “My daughter is not a mensch. Instead of stepping on everyone else’s head, she should take responsibility for herself.” Asked if there was any place for Gitty in KJ if she was not religious, Deborah says, “She should stop blaming religion and trying to make us monsters.”

Hearing this, Gitty says, “just pisses me off.” Nonetheless, she’ll always love her mother no matter what, even if much of that love is mixed with *rachmonus*, which is Yiddish for pity.

“I know what she goes through,” Gitty says, recalling the time when she was 10 and Deborah took her, along with her brother and sister, and left KJ. “She was running away,” Gitty says. “We stayed a couple of weeks at a time in different places, like refugees.” Eventually, they came to a Far Rockaway shelter, where they remained for several weeks.

[Next: The traditions of Hasidic marital life.](#)



For Gitty, Far Rockaway was a turning point. “My stepfather told me not to chew gum because ‘only horses and goys chew gum.’ In Rockaway, I met Jews who weren’t religious, blacks, Catholics—they didn’t seem so bad. On my brother’s birthday, they gave him a party, sang ‘Happy Birthday.’ In KJ no one sang ‘Happy Birthday.’ ”

The hemmed skirt was like that, one more reason for *rachmonus*. Only a few weeks before, Gitty saw several of the drawings Deborah had done as a teenager. “They were so beautiful.” Her mother also had a fabulous singing voice.

Gitty says for a long time she tried to get her mother to sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” from *The Wizard of Oz*, one of Matty and Carol’s favorite films. For a while Gitty thought Deborah wouldn’t sing the song because “we were taught when a rainbow appears in the sky it meant G-d was angry with the Jews. G-d once destroyed the world with a flood but he promised never to do it again. So now, instead of a flood, he leaves a rainbow, as a warning. You see a rainbow, you’re supposed to repent. They always make me anxious.”

The real reason her mother is reluctant to sing, Gitty adds, is that in KJ a man is not supposed to hear a woman singing, especially if she has a beautiful voice. It distracts him from thinking about G-d.

With that, Gitty tossed the skirt into the backseat of the car. At the end of the day, it was just too ugly to wear.

Sometimes, primping her cut-short black hair, applying eyeliner, or staring into space, a curl of cigarette smoke slinking from her poutish mouth, Gitty will strike a pose reminiscent of Elizabeth Taylor, in her *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* phase.

Gitty, who, of course, has no idea who Elizabeth Taylor is, and who doesn't know that the star once married that *putz* Eddie Fisher, which made her a little Jewish, before Richard Burton at least, asks, "Is that good?"

Told this was "good," Gitty cocked her heart-shaped head and smiled with the knowingness of the great-looking girl. But more than that, tell her she looks hot in the high-waisted shorts she picked up at Fulton Street Mall for \$14, and Gitty reveals, more than anything else, relief. For, if the mysterious gift of human beauty likely requires a lucky swerve in the DNA, Gitty's father, the crazed Chaim, repository of dark and brooding Sephardic blood, did her a great favor, genetically speaking. He gave her a way out of KJ.

Gitty claims she had little hint she might be beautiful before her marriage. "You didn't think about it. Some KJ houses don't even have mirrors. Boys aren't allowed to look in them. It's vain." The issue of Gitty's attractiveness never came into play until Yoely Grunwald said his friends were congratulating him on scoring such a hot babe.

Gitty says she was happy enough to marry Yoely. "I wanted out of my parents' house. Marriage meant more freedom." Plus Yoely seemed relatively liberal. He kept his beard trimmed, wore his *peyos* behind his ears. In retrospect, however, Gitty says, her marriage was doomed from the start.

"In KJ, you're supposed to screw on your wedding night," says Gitty. "If you don't, then the marriage isn't consummated." The night before, Gitty says, "they get you a *kallah* helper"—literally, a bride helper—"who tells you what you need to know about sex, because you know nothing. I was such an innocent virgin, you have no idea."

While dispensing with the old story about the sheet with the hole as a myth, Gitty explains many other birds-and-bees facts of KJ life, "like how sleeping with your husband on Friday night is twice as good as any other night. But you can't look at him. The room has to be pitch dark. There's no foreplay. This is totally about reproduction. You're supposed to be thinking about G-d the whole time.

"A lot of grooms faint on their wedding nights," Gitty continues. "You see—before you get married, they keep you apart. You talk to the person once or twice. On your wedding night, you're supposed to get it on with this total stranger. It is really bad for guys. Hasidic men are told all their lives if they masturbate they go to hell. Spilling the seed—that's the biggest sin. At school, a lot of the boys had their pockets sewn up so couldn't poke around with their hands. Then, all of a sudden, they're with this naked woman and they think if they don't screw her and produce more Jews, G-d is going to get really, really mad at them. That is a lot of pressure.

[Next: How she began to rebel against the rules.](#)



“I wanted to make our marriage something special. But in KJ, everything is tradition. You walk in the footsteps of your parents. So we never solved a problem between us. Yoely called his mother.”

Eventually, Gitty pushed back. “I started slow. I really believed if I broke the rules, G-d would punish me. I wore stockings without seams up the back, then a denim skirt. In KJ, what really matters is what people say. Do something wrong, everyone is talking about it. That’s how they keep you in line. When Yoely heard someone saw me with my hair showing, he said, ‘You’re making me look bad, you’re making my whole family look bad.’ ”

The critical battleground in the War Between the Grunwalds would prove to be *niddah*, or “separation,” i.e., when the menstruating female is considered “impure” and kept apart from her husband. “It isn’t just your period,” Gitty says. After a woman stops bleeding, she has to wear white underwear for seven days, checking constantly to see if there’s any discharge. Should spotting occur, the woman takes her underwear to a special rabbi who examines the color, shape, and density of the stain. It is he who divines when it is safe for the woman to immerse herself in the *mikvah* (ritual bath) and be reunited with her husband.

“Great, huh? Some old rabbi looking at your panties with a magnifying glass?” Gitty asks. “This was so embarrassing to me. In KJ, everything is about sex—this idea of sex made up by men from 300 years ago.”

“I wouldn’t do it anymore. I stopped counting, wore black underwear. I walked around the house in shorts, because when you’re impure, your husband can’t touch you or even look at your arm. Yoely would hide his eyes and start crying, ‘Put on your turban, please put on your turban.’ ”

Asked if she was torturing Yoely by showing him her body, Gitty says, “Maybe. But he was torturing me. He saw me hug my grandfather and started yelling how it was a *sexual* hug. We tortured each other.”

Yoely made some compromises. He miscalculated, however, when he wired his home with Internet access. “He thought, *If I give her this, then she’ll shut up and be satisfied,*” Gitty says.

“Once I read blogs from people who had gotten out of places like KJ, there was no turning back. Yoely begged me to stay. It is humiliating for a Satmar man to have his wife leave him. But it was too late,” says Gitty, who would start her own blog, *1 Beautiful Stranger*, where she wrote about her misplaced life in Kiryas Joel.

It is another mid-spring Friday afternoon in Kiryas Joel. Gitty drove up hoping to see Esther Miriam, but when she arrived, Yoely had changed the plan. Now if Gitty wanted to see Esther Miriam before Shabbos, she would have to ask, in writing, by Wednesday. “He can’t say that ... on Friday!” Gitty fumed.

Gitty called Yoely at the car dealership, but he wouldn’t come to the phone. Gitty knew the game. Yoely would stall her until the Shabbos siren, and then there would be nothing she could do.

Gitty said it would be interesting to see the men go to Friday-night services, so a couple of hours later we were parked across from the huge, fortresslike building that serves as KJ’s main shul. Not wishing to be seen, Gitty secreted herself under a jacket in the passenger seat, peeking out to offer an often irreverent Who’s Who on the passing worshippers.

On Friday nights in Jerusalem, the black hats surge dancing toward the Western Wall. In KJ, the procession is a quieter, more stately affair. With the full moon rising above the roof of the shul, grandfathers came accompanied by sons, who in turn brought their sons, some as young as 3 and 4, *peyos* dangling from the sides of their heads. As I watched the generations climb the synagogue’s heavy stone steps, it was easy to think this was what the Baal Shem Tov meant when he compared his followers to a vast and deathless tree with every Jew “a limb of the Divine Presence.”

Then, with a start, Gitty ducked down below the dashboard. “Shit. It’s Aaron Teitelbaum.”

And there he was, no more than twenty feet away: the rebbe and spiritual leader of Kiryas Joel. In a full-length black satin overcoat, walking with a silver-handled cane, the 60-year-old Teitelbaum was accompanied by a dozen followers, several sporting *shtreimels*, the layer-cake-size sable-fur hats often worn by Satmar men.

“Know how much they cost, those *shtreimels*?” Gitty spat. “Five thousand dollars ... maybe \$6,000. Families go bankrupt buying those hats.”

[Next: The custody battle over Esther Miriam goes to court.](#)



It was assumed that Aaron, oldest son of the Satmar rebbe Moses Teitelbaum, would become the group's leader. In 1999, however, the elder Teitelbaum split the realm between Aaron and his younger brother, Zalmen. In the biblical-style birthright schism that followed—which many said was more about real-estate money and power than religious piety—Zalmen wound up with Williamsburg, the crown jewel, leaving Kiryas Joel to Aaron.

Gitty peered through the yellowed glass of the shul windows. Men were starting to pray in there, their heads lurching back and forth, looking like silhouettes in their black coats. “I envy them sometimes,” Gitty said. “They never have to make another decision in their whole lives.”

After she left Kiryas Joel, Gitty fell in with the crowd of Hasidic “dropouts” and “rebels,” people who, like her, had fled places like Kiryas Joel or been kicked out. “In KJ, I was a freak,” Gitty says. “The rebels told me I was cool. I felt like I’d just gotten out of prison. If there was a party that night, I might think about going.”

This was the beginning of the wild times, making the rounds of pads in Monsey and the Lower East Side, hanging out with artists, people trying to make something beautiful, not ugly. When Esther Miriam was snatched, Gitty became a scene celebrity. Everyone knew the story of Gitty and her baby.

In the end, however, Gitty decided the scene had too much “damage” for her. Here were these brilliant, ruined people, floating from place to place, homeless, stoned out of their minds half the time. Last Purim, one of the rebels OD’d on coke and ground-up Xanax, a typical ex-Hasid drug concoction. The rebels were stuck between two worlds, Gitty thought, a dangerous place to be.

“First I loved it, then it scared me, now it makes me sad,” said Gitty one early spring afternoon, standing on

the edge of a pond near South Fallsburg, not far from the now-shuttered Pines Hotel, once a Borscht Belt standby. The rebels had gotten hold of a country campsite, a wild A-frame house heated only by a wooden stove. Everyone was hanging out, some on acid, playing Hasidic songs, wrapping each other in prayer shawls, shouting praises of the Baal Shem Tov, and screaming they were “the new hippies.”

There was a fine, doomed romance in the moment, but Gitty was unimpressed. Watching stoned rebels paddle across the half-frozen lake, she said, “Don’t they know if they fall in they’ll freeze to death?”

Driving back that night, Gitty asked me my impressions of KJ. It was a vexing question because how can you really know about a place without living there? Still, we were dealing with impressions, and even if the Satmars were famous for their *chesed*, or charity, KJ did not strike this traveler as a very *haymische* place. On Lee Avenue in Williamsburg it was no big deal to get a smile and a hearty “zeit gezunt” from a *shtreimel*-wearing Satmar. These were city people, Americans; they lived in the world. In the KJ boondocks, among these Hebrew hillbillies and their fundamentalist idea of chosen-peopleness, ask someone “Which way to Route 17?” and they’d often just turn their backs on you. The message was clear: Here, you are Other.

The results of most *beth din* arbitrations are accepted in civil court, but judgments in child-custody cases are not binding. What it comes down to, one matrimonial lawyer says, is “the interpretation of the term ‘in the best interests of the child.’ In rabbinical court, that means in best *spiritual* interests of the child.” Such was the case in her hearing, contends Gitty. “They told me if I gave Yoely a *get*, a Jewish divorce, they’d help me get custody, but it was all lies. They said Esther Miriam should stay with my ex until I settled down. I thought I had settled down. I had an apartment, a job. For them, that meant I had to be religious again.”

Gitty’s subsequent civil-custody case did not begin more auspiciously. Attired in a fanny-hugging skirt, spike-heel boots, hair slicked down like a post-punk flapper, Gitty was optimistic as she entered the Orange County courthouse in Goshen for her first hearing. These hopes were soon dashed, however, when Yoely’s lawyer demanded Gitty take an immediate “hair follicle” drug test.

A hair-follicle test can detect drug use over several months. Obviously, this was Yoely’s plan from the start, Gitty said. He knew about the rebels, that Gitty had hung out with them. Gitty’s lawyer, Daniel Schwartz, offered his client only cold comfort. “You fail that test, and you can kiss custody good-bye,” he told her. “You’re sunk.”

[Next: Gitty's attempts at a "normal" life in Brooklyn.](#)

“I smoke a joint months ago and that gives them the right to take my daughter away?” Gitty moaned. An hour later, she was in a Nanuet headshop full of skull-shaped bongos and Day-Glo Bob Marley posters looking for a shampoo her rebel friends said might help her beat the test. “Nettles and sassafras,” Gitty read haltingly from the list of unfamiliar ingredients. “This is never going to work.”

Gitty’s test came up positive, as she knew it would. But contrary to Daniel Schwartz’s prediction, she is not sunk. Not yet. But court dates take time, something Gitty does not have. She knew Yoely, with his *get* from the rabbinical court, had remarried. Soon he’d be starting a new family. As daughter of Chaim, stepdaughter of Avrum, Gitty knew what that meant. Soon, very possibly, Esther Miriam would become nothing more than an afterthought, the bad memory of her ex-husband’s first, terribly failed marriage. She’d be the older stepsister charged with the care of her younger, favored siblings, a drudge cleaning between the floorboards for weeks before each Passover, someone who saw beautiful rainbows and felt only dread. This was the

ultimate nightmare: Esther Miriam married off at age 17, bearing a dozen children to an indifferent KJ guy she'd never love. From Gitty's point of view, there could be no worse next chapter in the New York Jewish generational saga that began with Matty and Carol Feinman.

Meanwhile, Gitty is trying to "be normal." Mostly she's been looking for a job, which is difficult since, like most KJ dropouts, she has no GED and few skills. She's checked the lower-Manhattan restaurants, hoping to catch on as a waitress, but has no experience. "Even in the diner they want experience," she says. The fact is, even if she ate dim sum for the first time and pronounced it "totally *trayf*, totally good," Gitty's expertise in non-kugel cuisine is spotty. The other day, she had to ask what a lobster was. Her best employment prospects seem to be as a home aide for the elderly, a field where fluent Yiddish can be a major plus. This is not considered a thrilling option by Gitty, who fancies herself more in the line of an actress or fashion designer.

But she's doing her best to "remain positive." Recently, her beloved younger brother, Sruli, came to New York from Toronto, where he received a scholarship to art school after fleeing KJ. They stayed at Matty and Carol Feinman's house and went to the Met. Little by little, Gitty has been filling in what she calls "my cluelessness." The other day, dialing through my iPod, Gitty said, "Oh, Billie Holiday. My grandmother loves Billie Holiday." A moment later, when "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" punched up on the box, Gitty said, "Wow, Billie Holiday is a woman?"

As the case drags on, some of Gitty's friends have attempted to console her, saying she'll have more babies and the pain she feels over Esther Miriam will go away. "I hear that and I want to punch in the face of those people," she says.

Gitty knows nothing will ever be right without Esther Miriam. A couple weeks ago, after the usual hassle, Yoely agreed to let Gitty see Esther Miriam at Deborah's house. Gitty arrived to find the Barbie dolls she'd bought Esther Miriam wrapped in duct tape.

"They were idols, my parents said," Gitty recounted. "Then Esther Miriam started to sing, so they called the rabbi about the *halachas* about whether men could hear the voice of a 4-year-old."

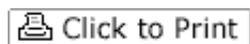
A few days later, Gitty was in Williamsburg, but not the Satmar Williamsburg. Red baseball hat on her head, looking good in a grayish T-shirt with cutoff sleeves, she was in a Brazilian restaurant under the Williamsburg Bridge, eating some fish stew she never knew existed before. Recalling the details of her weekend, she said, "I must have a head made out of metal not to go crazy from all this."

Then Gitty's cell phone rang. It was Esther Miriam. The call was court-ordered, ruled by the Orange County judge after hearing that Yoely's family refused to pick up when Gitty called to talk to her daughter.

"Mommy," came the high-pitched voice, audible even with the J train rumbling on overhead. "Esther Miriam!" Gitty replied. When Esther Miriam asked when she would see her mother again, Gitty brushed a stray tear from her eye and said, "Soon ... very soon."

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