

TOWNIES LAVANYA SUNKARA

City of Dry Sheets and Dry Eyes



As a travel writer for a luxury magazine, I get to sleep in exotic locations on top of memory-foam mattresses with 800-thread-count sheets. It is a major indulgence, since for most of my childhood and my early teens, I slept on the floor on wet sheets and a rubber mat.

Lavanya Sunkara writes about travel and the environment.

I grew up in the 1980s in a town called Garividi, on the eastern coast of India. Garividi was slightly more advanced than a village because it had an iron ore factory, but it didn't have pharmacies selling Pull-Ups or doctors providing medication for chronic bed-wetters like me. And so, four to five nights a week, until high school, I woke up with a wet blanket under me and guilt over my head.

My father, a college professor and the head of the household, occupied the only bed we had, while my mother slept next to my little brother and me on the floor. She wanted to make sure we didn't feel neglected. But before she put me to sleep, she gave me a nightly warning, "You better not be lazy and wet the bed again!"

Almost every morning my mother dragged the soaked linens outside and, cursing, washed them while the neighbors watched. "Who would marry someone who wets the bed every night?" she'd ask. As loving as my parents were, they could not understand that I had no control over my humiliating habit.

The older I got, the harder it became. I rarely spoke up at school, never played sports, failed at singing and dancing, sat in the back of the class and hid my low grades from my parents.

Then, when I was 15, my family moved to the United States. During the weeks we spent packing our things, I convinced myself that my condition wouldn't be a problem in America. Somehow the change in time or climate would solve it. When we moved in with my mom's older



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freshener and flipped the cushion upside down, praying no one would find out.

Inevitably, they did. I was summoned to a family meeting around the table. My mother's gaze was hotter than the chai she poured into our cups. Finally, my Uncle Murthy broke the silence: "How come you never took her to a urologist?"

We had come from a place where it was hard enough to get a doctor to take care of the most serious health issues, let alone something as private (and embarrassing) as bed-wetting. But my uncle's words gave me hope. The next week, I took the 7 train to a clinic. A doctor diagnosed primary nocturnal enuresis, involuntary nightly urination that continues past the age of 5, and gave me a drug commonly used to curb bed-wetting. Soon I started to wake up dry.

I felt more confident; I made friends and got into college, then moved to Berkeley, Calif., to work for the Sierra Club. My parents were so proud. I started law school and fell in love with an aspiring software entrepreneur. Although he came from a different world, growing up wealthy in Silicon Valley with an Indian father and a white mother, we bonded over politics and our love of nature.

But after we had dated for two years,

he cheated on me. He said he couldn't marry me — he had always imagined that his wife would be white. I was devastated; my mother's warnings had come back to haunt me. One morning, instead of waking up with a wet blanket underneath me, I woke up with a dark cloud above. The mild depression I had suffered for years turned clinical. I dropped out of school when a mental breakdown landed me in the hospital.

This time, my family came to my rescue. They didn't think it was my fault. They brought me back to their new home on Long Island and took me to a psychiatrist. They said they believed in me and waited patiently for my recovery. Some nights, when I couldn't bear to fall asleep, my mother would get in bed beside me and tell me Indian folk tales. My favorite was about a father who teaches his sons that a single twig is far easier to break than a bunch of them together.

Five years later, I'm happy and healthy, and still in New York — the city that became my family's home; the city that saved me twice.

This is an excerpt from *Townies*, a series about New York and other cities at nytimes.com/opinionator.

New York, my family and sound medical advice helped me stop wetting the bed.

sister — my pedamma — in Astoria, Queens, my mother warned me: "Don't shame our family here. If they find out, they could kick us out sooner than we could afford to leave."

The first few weeks, things went smoothly — perhaps because I hardly slept or drank. Yet, one night, when I crashed on the lavish living room couch after a long day of exploring the American Museum of Natural History, my bladder emptied itself. There was no rubber mat underneath to stop the urine from seeping through the cream-colored cushions. I woke up and panicked, rubbed the soiled area with a cloth, sprayed air