



Only starlight brightened the narrow road into Nicks Lake. I drove slowly, not wanting to hit one of the white-tailed deer that are as numerous in the Adirondacks as squirrels in Central Park.

Jason, my nine-year-old passenger, peered into the shadowy forest. "Is anything in those woods going to jump out at me?" he asked.

Looking at him, I thought maybe it wasn't too smart bringing this "Fresh Air Kid" to the North Woods on his first night out of the Bronx.

At our campsite, my husband, Neil, and our sons, Matt and Wade, were waiting in lawn chairs pulled close to the stone fireplace. Orange flames spit

## JASON'S PARK

by Aline A. Newman

Photos by author



sparks higher than their heads. Wade offered Jason a charred marshmallow and Matt pointed out the yellow dome tent where the kids would sleep.

"We're sleeping out there — on the ground?" asked Jason, his eyes huge.

Another mistake, I thought. How could I expect this kid to sleep outdoors? He'd probably be terrified. He'd already asked about sleeping arrangements at our house and I'd offered the spare room. But he hated being alone and said he'd rather bed down on the floor in the kids' room ... "as long as there're no rats."

No rats. But something equally frightening to a kid from the city — silence. By 10 p.m., the only

sounds were the crackling of campfires and an occasional bang when someone let go the rest-room door. So that first night, Jason made his own noise. Like a young Hammer, his voice beat out a rhythm on the balsam scented air. "My name is Jason. I'm the leader of this nation. Your name is Matt. You're skinny, not too fat. Next, we have Wade..." When he fell asleep, I tiptoed over, poked my head inside the boys' tent and switched off his flashlight.

Jason woke with the sun. He wolfed down nine pancakes and six slices of bacon. "This stuff's good food," he announced between bites. He grinned while I slathered suntan lotion on his ebony back and arms. He pedaled Matt's 12-speed around and around the loop, squeezing the hand brakes tight and skidding sideways with each stop. After he miscued and came down on the gravel roadway, tearing chunks of flesh off one knee, he simply bit his lip while I poured half a bottle of peroxide over the wound.

On his first canoe ride he knelt in the stern and paddled furiously. Each stroke splashed icy water all over Wade, who hunkered down into his life jacket for protection. The canoe nosed into cattails, hung up on a submerged log, and finally turned in circles. Wade groaned. Jason laughed. When Neil suggested baseball, I couldn't understand Jason's excitement until he asked for uniforms. Then, I realized the kid had never played sandlot. He expected pinstripes, hot dogs, and cheering fans. The most I could produce was a Turin Little League cap (which he wore backwards and to bed) and the hot dog. But that was all right — as Jason said about that and everything we did, "We're having fun! And we were. All of us.



*The Fresh Air Fund has a 116-year history of opening the outdoors to inner city children.*

Watching Jason relish a swim in a mountain lake raised goose bumps on my flesh, and not because the water was cold.

The Fourth of July, we joined a flotilla of 200 speedboats, party barges, and fishing scows bound for the fireworks over Old Forge Pond. Jason's eyes grew wider than ever. He "ooed" and "aahed" at lasers, twisters and starbursts.

"Haven't you ever seen fireworks?" I asked.

"Not in the sky," he answered. "Just jumpin' jacks in the streets. Nobody'd dare do this where I live. Too much noise. People'd think they were shooting."

It is fortuitous that New York, with America's largest city, is also blessed with the largest park in the 48 contiguous states. I thank Heaven for the foresight of those wise men a century ago who saw the Adirondacks for the miracle it is and established the legal structures to preserve it.

In these forever wild mountains a city child can drop his guard.



Here, he needn't dive for cover at a sound like gunshots...only look to the sky and admire the show. And here, a cry in the night is only the call of a loon.

Adirondack author Anne LaBastille says, "The Park's greatest value to humankind will be the healing of psychological wounds. The mountains, lakes and forests will become our psychiatrists."

I need the wilderness. My husband and children need it. But Jason needs it most of all. 

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