

## Pisces: Compassion

The boys looked at Burton sitting across the room, staring vacantly out of the window. "Do we *have* to ask him?" inquired Lance. "I feel sorry for him and all that, but he's not going to do anything but sit there. He'll spoil the party."

"I think it will mean a lot to him to be asked. He's always being left out," argued Frank. "Besides, how can he spoil the party by sitting there? We can still have a good time. How about it, guys?"

Several heads nodded reluctantly, and Lance said, "OK, but you ask him. I don't want to."

Burton, two years older than his classmates, was mentally retarded, but there was no special school in the area to which his parents could send him. They had enrolled him in high school, where he was taking courses such as shop, art, and physical education, but he read poorly and could not master the academic subjects. He was generally withdrawn and made no trouble, and the other students, although vaguely bothered by the situation, did not try to draw him into their circle after the first few tentative, unsuccessful efforts.

Frank had been thinking about Burton's isolation for a long time. He was really no more eager than Lance or the others to have Burton "tag along" on their expeditions, but he did pity the boy and his conscience goaded him into admitting that they should make more of an effort to be kind to him.

Burton nodded his head vaguely when Frank invited him, and Frank was not sure he had even understood. When he called Burton's mother that evening, however, she said that he had talked of nothing but the invitation, and told Frank how grateful she

was for what he had done. Everyone had been asked to bring some food to the party, and Burton's mother agreed to bake a cake.

When Frank and Lance drove up the next evening, Burton came out proudly bearing the cake in a box. He made little effort to talk to the boys, but cradled the box carefully in his lap, smiling. Once at the party, he sat quietly and watched the proceedings. The guests made a special effort, a few at a time, to sit and talk with him, and although he remained generally silent, his usually vacant eyes sparkled with interest, and he occasionally smiled and nodded to the others. His feet kept time to the music blaring from the record player, and he appeared far less withdrawn than the others had ever seen him.

When the food was being set out on a long buffet table, Frank suggested that Burton might like to cut his cake. At first reluctant, Burton eventually responded to Frank's gentle urging, and began carefully to cut. He worked with what seemed incredible slowness, and his face was a study in concentration, but the slices were even. After a while, Frank suggested that Burton eat his supper and let someone else finish, but Burton appeared so stricken that Frank said no more. Finally Burton triumphantly finished his work, and when several people complimented him on his fine job, he beamed with pleasure.

Next afternoon, Burton's mother appeared unexpectedly at Frank's house. "I just wanted you to know how happy you have made Burton," she said. "I'm sure he didn't say much at the party — he never talks to people until he knows them well and feels safe with them — but he's been so enthusiastic at home. Once he even said, 'I think they like me'." Burton's

mother wiped her eyes and Frank squirmed uncomfortably.

“Asking him to cut the cake was a master stroke,” Burton’s mother continued. “What made you think of that? There’s not too much he can do, but you have no idea what a changed person he is when he *does* manage to do something well and is praised for it.”

From then on, Burton’s life at school was different. Knowing now the reason for his silence, the students continued talking to him even when he did not respond. They asked him to do things for them, even if it was only to sharpen pencils or deliver books to the library. They made sure a group always sat with him at the lunch table, and Frank and Lance picked him up at his house each morning so that his mother would not have to drive him to school. He was invited to the class functions and the private parties; sometimes he still sat in a corner, remote and withdrawn, but more and more often he laughed and talked with the others — often childish conversation, but animated and obviously happy.

One day the teacher sent Burton on an errand, and his mother came into the room. “I don’t know if you realize how much your compassion and understanding have meant to my son,” she told the class. “He feels himself a part of your group — the first time he has ever “belonged” anywhere. I know he’s very limited, but thanks to your help he is working fully within those limits, and leading a meaningful life. Bless you all.”