

# Mermaid

by Michael Hartford

While the other kids blew bubbles, Maddy clung to my neck. She didn't cry or scream, and she held on loosely, not with the death grip some kids have. For five Wednesday afternoons, Maddy wrapped her pudgy arms over my shoulders and rested her bottom on my hip while I shouted encouragement to the rest. At the end of the class I set her down on her feet, she ran to her mother for a towel, she came back and stooped to kiss my cheek and whisper, "I love you, Penny."

By week six, the other kids would jump into the shallow end and hold their breath underwater. Maddy's golden ringlets had yet to touch water.

"You have to do something," I told her with ten minutes left. "You have to get wet." Maddy just smiled.

So I dropped her. I didn't have to pry her loose, toss her away, I just let go and she fell. I thought she might swim off like a silver darter released, a captive mermaid freed. But she sank.

Through the chlorinated water her blue eyes were moons, her ringlets anemone tendrils, her smile shimmering on her round face. I pulled her up and hugged her close, her arms around my neck. She never cried.

At the end of the class I set her on her feet, she ran to her mother for a towel, she came back and stooped to kiss my cheek and whisper, "I love you, Penny."

