Learning to Swim

by Kyoko Mori
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An autobiography is a story about a person’s life told by that person. As you read, think about the clues that identify this as a true story that the author has written about herself.
I was determined to swim at least twenty-five meters in the front crawl. As we did every summer, my mother, younger brother, and I were going to stay with my grandparents, who lived in a small farming village near Himeji, in Japan. From their house it was a short walk through some rice paddies to the river where my mother had taught me how to swim when I was six. First, she showed me how to float with my face in the water, stretching my arms out in front of me and lying very still so my whole body was like a long plastic raft full of air. If you thought about it that way, my mother said, floating was as easy as just standing around or lying down to sleep. Once I got comfortable with floating, she taught me to kick my legs and paddle my arms so I could move forward, dog-paddling with my face out of the water.

Now I was too old to dog-paddle like a little kid. My mother had tried to teach me the front crawl the previous summer. I knew what I was supposed to do—flutter kick and push the water from front to back with my arms, while keeping my face in the water and turning sideways to breathe—but somehow there seemed to be too much I had to remember all at once. I forgot to turn my head and found myself dog-paddling again after only a few strokes. This summer, I thought, I would work harder and learn to swim as smoothly and gracefully as my mother. Then I would go back to school in September and surprise my classmates and my teachers.

At our monthly swimming test, I would swim the whole length of our pool and prove myself one of the better swimmers in our class.

At our school, where we had monthly tests to determine how far each of us could swim without stopping, everyone could tell who the best and the worst swimmers were by looking at our white cloth swimming caps. For every five or ten meters we could swim, our mothers sewed a red or black line on the front of the cap. At the last test we had, in late May, I had made it all the way across the width of the pool in an awkward combination of dog paddle and front crawl, earning the three red lines on my cap for fifteen meters. That meant I was an average swimmer, not bad, not great. At the next test, in September, I would have to try the length of the pool, heading toward the deep end. If I made it all the way across, I would earn five red lines for twenty-five meters. There were several kids in our class who had done that, but only one of them had turned around after touching the wall and swum farther, heading back toward the shallow end. He stopped halfway across, where the water was up to our chests. If he had gone all the way back, he would have earned five black lines, meaning “fifty meters and more.” That was the highest mark.

All the kids who could swim the length of the pool were boys. They were the same boys I competed with every winter during our weekly race from the cemetery on the hill to our schoolyard. They were always in the first pack of runners to come back—as I was. I could beat most of them in the last dash across the schoolyard because I was a good sprinter, but in the pool they easily swam past me and went farther. I was determined to change that. There was no reason that I should spend my summers dog-paddling in the shallow end of the pool while these boys glided toward the deep end, their legs cutting through the water like scissors.
My brother and I got out of school during the first week of July and were at my grandparents’ house by July 7—the festival of the stars. On that night if the sky was clear, the Weaver Lady and the Cowherd Boy would be allowed to cross the river of Heaven—the Milky Way—for their once-a-year meeting. The Weaver Lady and the Cowherd Boy were two stars who had been ordered to live on opposite shores of the river of Heaven as punishment for neglecting their work when they were together.

On the night of the seventh, it was customary to write wishes on pieces of colored paper and tie them to pieces of bamboo. On the night of their happy meeting, the Weaver Lady and the Cowherd Boy would be in a generous mood and grant the wishes. I wished, among other things, that I would be able to swim the length of the pool in September. Of course I knew, as my mother reminded me, that no wish would come true unless I worked hard.

Every afternoon my mother and I walked down to the river in our matching navy blue swimsuits. We swam near the bend of the river where the current slowed. The water came up to my chest, and I could see schools of minnows swimming past my knees and darting in and out among the rocks on the bottom. First I practiced the front crawl, and then a new stroke my mother was teaching me: the breaststroke.

“A good thing about this stroke,” she said, “is that you come up for air looking straight ahead, so you can see where you are going.”

We both laughed. Practicing the front crawl in the river—where there were no black lines at the bottom—I had been weaving wildly from right and left, adding extra distance.

As we sat together on the riverbank, my mother drew diagrams in the sand, showing me what my arms and legs should be doing. Then we lay down on the warm sand so I could practice the motions.

“Pretend that you are a frog,” she said. “Bend your knees and then kick back. Flick your ankles. Good.”

We got into the water, where I tried to make the motions I had practiced on the sand, and my mother swam underwater next to me to see what I was doing. It was always harder to coordinate my legs and arms in the water, but slowly, all the details that seemed so confusing at first came together, so I didn’t have to think about them separately. My mother was a good teacher. Patient and humorous, she talked me out of my frustrations even when
I felt sure I would never get better. By mid-August, in both the front crawl and the breaststroke, I could swim easily downstream—all the way to the rock that marked the end of the swimming area. My mother thought that the distance had to be at least fifty meters. When I reached the rock, I would turn around and swim against the current. It was harder going that way. I had to stop several times and rest, panting a little. But swimming in a pool where the water was still, I was sure I could easily go on for twenty-five meters.

That summer, during the third week of August, two of my uncles, their wives, and my mother decided to take a trip to the Sea of Japan for the weekend, bringing my brother, our cousins, and me. All of us kids were excited about going to the seacoast. It was on the less populated side of our country, which faced China, Korea, Russia, and other faraway northern places.

I had never been to that sea, though the river we swam in ended there. When my mother warned me not to swim past the rock that marked off the swimming area—because the current got strong—she said, “We don’t want you carried past Ikaba, all the way to the Sea of Japan.” Ikaba, a village to the north, got its name, which meant “fifty waves,” because the river was so turbulent and wavy there. I imagined the water tumbling down rocky mountains from Ikaba to the faraway sea.

The next morning after breakfast, we dressed in our swimsuits and walked to the beach, which was just down the road from the inn. On a narrow strip of white sand, a few families were clustered around bright red, blue, and pink beach towels. Some people were already in the water. Even a long way out, the water came only to their waists or chests. Big waves were hitting the rocks on a piece of land that jutted out to the sea to our left.

While my uncles and aunts and their kids spread out their beach towels on the sand, my mother and I walked to the water’s edge, leaving my brother behind with my cousins. I had never swum in the sea before, but I had seen pictures in my geography book of people floating on the Dead Sea. The writing underneath said that the salt in the water made it easier for people to float.

The sea was cold as my mother and I walked in—much colder than the pool or the river—but it was a hot sunny morning. I knew I would get used to it soon. We went in and splashed around for a while; then I started practicing my front crawl.
I couldn’t tell if it really was easier to float. A big wave came and hit my face sideways just as I was turning my head to breathe. I stood up coughing. The water didn’t taste like the salt water that I gargled with when I had a cold. Instead, it had a strong bitter taste that stung my nostrils and my throat. My eyes burned.

“Try floating on your back,” my mother suggested, flopping back and closing her eyes. “It’s easy.”

She was right. In the pool I could float on my stomach, but never on my back. But in the sea, my legs and head didn’t start sinking while my chest and stomach stayed afloat. All of me was floating. I could almost take a nap.

Once we got tired of floating, my mother and I started jumping the waves. Side by side holding hands, we treaded water, each paddling with one arm instead of two, waiting for the next big wave to come surging our way. If we stopped moving at just the right time, we could crest over the top and glide down to the other side, falling slowly down the gentle slope till another wave came and lifted us up. All around us, other grownups and kids were doing the same thing. There were so many waves coming and going. Sometimes we couldn’t see people who were only a few feet away until a wave lifted us up and dropped us almost on top of them. Laughing, we would apologize before another wave swept us away.

I don’t know how long we were riding the waves before I noticed that my mother and I hadn’t seen anyone for a long time. I thought of another thing too. When we first started, my feet had brushed against the sand bottom almost every time we came down. In the hall between the waves, I’d be standing in the water only up to my chest. That hadn’t happened for a while. My feet hadn’t touched bottom for at least twenty waves now. I stretched my body as straight as I could, trying to touch bottom with my toes. Nothing. Just as I opened my mouth to point that out to my mother, a big wave came, my head went under, and my hand was swept loose from hers. When I came up again, I was turned around, facing the shore for the first time. I couldn’t believe what I saw. The people on the beach looked so small that I couldn’t tell our family from anyone else’s.

Before I really understood what this meant, another wave rose, my head went under again, and I came up coughing and spitting. My mother, to my relief, was right beside me, treading water.

“Mom,” I tried to warn her, but the look on her face told me that she already knew. Her eyes were wide open and there was a big frown between her eyebrows.

“Turn around and swim,” she said. “It’s not as far as you think.”

“I can’t,” I gasped before a wave pounded me, filling my mouth with a burning, bitter taste.

My mother was beside me again, treading water. She couldn’t reach out and hold my hand now, I realized suddenly, because even she needed both of her arms to stay afloat. The water was moving underneath, pulling us sideways. The beach looked farther and farther away. It was all I could do to keep my head from going under.

My mother started flinging her hand upward, trying to wave it from side to side. She was calling for help. That meant we were drowning.

Before the next wave hit us, I kicked my legs as hard as I could and lunged toward my mother, making up the short distance between us. The wave hit. We came up, both of us coughing and spitting, my arms clasped tightly around her neck.
“Listen,” my mother said, in a choked-up voice. “You have to let go.”

“But I’ll drown,” I wailed.

She stopped moving her arms for just a moment—long enough to put them around me and draw me closer. I could feel my shoulders, wet and slippery, pressed against her collarbone. “Let go,” she said in a voice that sounded surprisingly calm. “Now, or we’ll both drown.”

By the time the next wave went over my head I was swimming alone, flailing my arms and legs to come up for air, and my mother was beside me. If it weren’t for me, I thought, she could easily swim back to the shore. She was a strong swimmer. We were drowning because of me.

“Stay calm,” she said, “and float.”

We treaded water for a while, and between the waves my mother looked around, no doubt trying to measure the distance we had to swim.

“Look over there,” she said, turning away from the shore and pointing toward the piece of land jutting into the sea. “We can’t swim back to the beach, but we can make it to those rocks.”

The waves had been pushing us sideways, toward the rocks, as well as farther from the shore. From where we were now, the tip of that land was about as far away as I could swim in the river without stopping if the current was with me. That piece of land was our last chance. If I couldn’t make it there, I would surely drown. Heading toward the rocks meant turning away from the beach completely, swimming farther out to sea. If I drifted too far to the side and missed the tip of the land, there wouldn’t be anywhere else. Every time I came up for air, I’d better be looking at those rocks, making sure they were still in my sight. The only stroke that would allow me to do that was the breaststroke.

I took a big breath and started kicking my legs with my knees bent, flicking my ankles the way my mother had taught me in the river. The arms, I told myself, should draw nice big arcs, not a bunch of little frantic circles that would make me tired. My mother swam right beside me in her easy graceful breaststroke—she was between me and the rest of the sea, guiding me toward the rocks, showing me how I should swim.

The waves we had been fighting were suddenly helping us. In just a few minutes, my mother and I stood on the rocky ground of that slip of land, looking back toward the shore. My legs felt wobbly, and I was breathing hard. The two of us looked at each other, too stunned to say anything. For a while we just stood trying to catch our breath, listening to the waves as they continued to crash at our feet. Then we started walking. The rocks formed a steep cliff above us, but at the bottom, there was enough room for us to walk side by side. Cautiously we picked our way back to the beach, trying not to cut our feet or slip back into the sea. On the way we noticed a group of people gathered on the sand, watching us. When we got there, they came rushing toward us. They were my uncles and several other men we had never seen.

“I waved for help,” my mother said to them.

“We thought you were just waving for fun,” one of my uncles said. “We didn’t know anything was wrong until we saw you walking on those rocks.”
One of the strangers, an old man in a shirt and trousers, shook his head. “You got caught in a riptide,” he said. “A fisherman drowned there a few years ago.”

Several people were talking all at once, saying how lucky we were, but I wasn’t listening very carefully. My brother was running toward us. Behind him, the beach was more crowded than when we had first started swimming. For the first time, I noticed an ice cream stand not too far away.

“Mom,” I said. “My throat hurts from the seawater. I would love some ice cream.”

When my mother told people the story of our near drowning, that was the detail she always emphasized—how I had calmly asked for ice cream as soon as we were back on the beach. Every time we remembered this incident, she said to me, “You are a brave girl. You let go of me when you had to.”

The way she talked about it, our experience in the Sea of Japan was a great adventure that proved my courage: If I could swim well enough not to drown in a place where a fisherman had died in a riptide, then I never again had to worry about drowning. I did not question her logic—though years later I realized that my mother had said just the right things to prevent me from becoming afraid.

If she had told stories of a near disaster, a close call—instead of the story about my courage—I might never have been able to swim again. Instead I believed that I had conquered that sea for good. All I had to do was be more careful and watch out for the riptide. My mother and I swam at the same beach again the same afternoon and the two following days; we returned to my grandparents’ house and continued our swimming lessons. I was getting so good, she said, that the following year she would teach me to butterfly.

Back at school in September, I swam the length of the pool in the breaststroke without stopping. When I got to the end, I touched the edge of the pool and turned around. The other side of the pool didn’t look nearly as far away as the shore had from the sea the day I had almost drowned. The water wasn’t moving or trying to pull me under. It was nothing. I started swimming back, past the first five meters where the pool was deep, then past the ten-meter mark, past the halfway mark, where the only other student from my class had stopped. I took a deep breath, changed to the front crawl, and swam all the way to the end. My hand hit the wall; I stood up.

My mother would be pleased, I thought, to sew five black lines on my cap.
Think Critically

1. How would you apply the lessons of this story to a challenge in your life, such as taking a test? **Text to Self**

2. No screaming, no choking, no thrashing about: Kyoko Mori’s autobiographical account is told so calmly that you may have to think twice before you realize what’s happening. Find a sample section to read aloud to demonstrate this calm style. **Think Like an Author**

3. At the beginning of her story, on page 398, Kyoko Mori tells about how she first learned to swim. What swimming basics did she learn first, second, and last in that passage? **Sequence**

4. What do you predict about Kyoko Mori’s future as a swimmer? What did you read in the story that helps you make that prediction? **Predict and Set Purpose**

5. **Look Back and Write** Look at pages 407–409 to recall how Kyoko’s mother helped her not to be afraid after the near-drowning. In your own words, write what strategy the mother used. Provide evidence to support your answer. **Test Practice**

**Extended Response**