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.
“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