

Hello, everybody! Can you guess my nickname? I'll give you three choices: (a) peach, (b) sweet kind beautiful genius girl, or (c) hammer. Listen to my story and try to guess.

Since I was a little girl, I have been scared of water. I was scared of the ocean because of the jellyfish. I was scared of the river because of the *kappa* water sprites. I was even scared of the bath because I thought I might drown. I was – and am – terrified of water.

In elementary school we had to take swimming lessons. But my teacher understood my feeling and let me stay on the shallow side. I really tried to swim. I kicked my feet like she taught us. I paddled my arms like she taught us. And I sank straight to the bottom like a hammer. This happened every time. Water went up my nose and tears came out of my eyes and I came out of the pool shaking and crying because I do not like water and water does not like me and I cannot swim.

The other girls teased me. “Look, here comes the Olympic swimmer!” “Hey, Aika, is your mother a brick?” But I kept practicing. Soon I could swim 3 meters before I sank like a hammer. Then I could swim 5 meters before I sank like a hammer. When I swam my brain said *jellyfish! jellyfish! jellyfish!*, but one day I actually reached the other end of the pool. And without dying!

At the end we had swimming tests. We had to swim 20 meters, four girls at a time. The other three girls in my group were excited. “I’m going to win!” “No, you’re not, I am!” “No, I’m going to beat both of you!” Both of you? There were four of us. What about me? I said, “Actually, I’m on your team, too.” She said, “Oh, well, Aika, you just do your best, okay?” Oh, my blood boiled! I made up my mind to beat all of them.

On the day of the swimming test, the four of us lined up on the edge of the pool, and I thought, “I’ve got to beat these girls! I’m not a hammer! I’m a beautiful genius dolphin girl!” The other students cheered as the teacher blew the whistle and we dove into the water. I kicked my feet as hard as I could. I paddled my arms as fast as I could. I was like a swimming tornado. I couldn’t see the other girls or anything, but I could hear the students cheering. I was winning!

At last I reached the other side and looked around me. I was alone! I had won! Sweet victory! Then I looked up. All three of the other girls were already sitting on the side of the pool, clapping for me. I was last, not first. But at least I had finished.

I’m still afraid of water. I’m still terrified of jellyfish. Last summer I didn’t go swimming once. But I have learned that it’s okay to be scared of some things. I have learned that it’s okay to be a hammer.

So now can you guess my nickname? That’s right. It’s actually “peach”. But that’s another story. If you’re lucky, maybe I’ll tell you that story next year.