

Chapter 5: "I'll be alright."

"I'll be alright."

Nakanishi lori said this as his grandparents pinched his cheeks and laughed.

"I wonder. Can you even eat the whole thing? Don't go leavin' leftovers now."

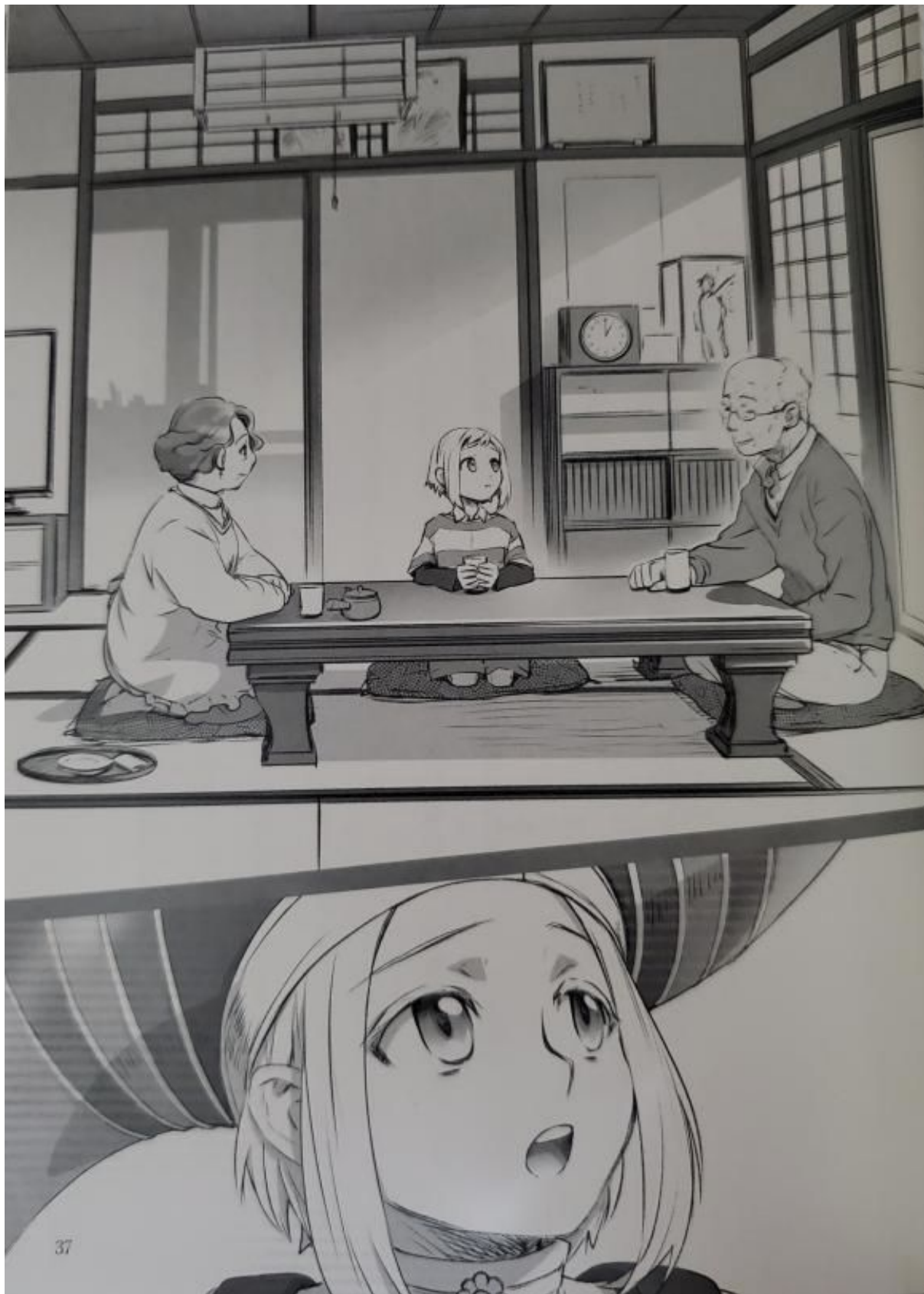
Grandpa said this with a laugh.

A weekend afternoon. The topic at hand was what to do about the bento lunches for next week's elementary school athletic meet.

lori had suggested they pack both onigiri and sandwiches. He knew how delicious his grandma's homemade bento was and he couldn't choose between the two. Last year's field trip she gave him onigiri, and this year it was a sandwich. Now he couldn't decide what to ask for this trip's bento.

lori never used to like eating. Both because of his general distaste for eating and not liking many foods in particular, it took him a long time to eat and made school lunches a pain.

But ever since moving in with his grandparents and eating his grandma's homemade cooking, he began to enjoy his meals little by little. His bodyweight steadily increased, and his malnourished and underweight body had finally reached a healthy round shape befitting a child. Even then his grandparents still thought of him as too thin and kept feeding him as much as possible.



"You've got a bigger appetite than your grandpa!"

lori's enthusiasm for his grandma's meals made her happy. Grandpa, after all, was set in his ways and only ate the same meals everyday on rotation--to have someone so enthusiastic about her cooking was unusual.

"Don't worry about me--I can eat it!" said lori.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," said grandpa. "Go ahead and make the bento, will ya? If he's got leftovers the four of us will eat it."

Grandpa had accounted for one person too many.

"He'll be coming home too, you know. You should make four people's worth."

"Huh, is dad coming home?"

"Yeah, he called last night. Said he got some time off."

lori's father was a salaryman who worked off in Shikoku apart from his family.* It had been about two months since he had last been home. The news brought a smile to lori's face.

He went back to his room, cleared his desk, and started writing an e-mail to his dad on his computer. The contents were mostly simple stuff, like a report of recent events. lori wasn't good at using the tiny keyboards on handheld devices and thus had to write all e-mails from a desktop computer, typing out each sentence slowly and carefully.

It was all the time he spent playing The World that got him so used to typing on the desktop computer, where he played a character called Bo.

The character he was playing then was an account that was being shared between two siblings--or at least, that's what he told people. lori didn't remember if it was him who came up with the idea to play a character like that or if it was someone else: his other self.

lori had suffered from a form of dissociative identity disorder since birth. In order to protect himself from the harsh world around him, the siblings Bo and his older sister Saku were born. For lori, The World was his escape--when he was playing as Sakubo in The World it was his brief respite from the pain and suffering he was escaping from in reality.

lori couldn't remember the details exactly, but it seemed like someone he met in the game had called a child protective services agency. The agency had reached out to lori's father quite quickly, and he immediately sent lori back to his own hometown, handling all the processes for transferring schools, setting up doctor's appointments, and so on. After all that, Saku hadn't made an appearance in a long time. To lori's doctors, this was proof that his treatment was working. However, for lori, the only

complaint he'd had since moving to his father's hometown is that he hadn't been able to meet Saku since...

His grandmother brought out peeled persimmons for dessert.

"This is delicious!"

*This is a common practice in Japan and not signs of an estranged relationship between Iori and his father. Expensive property values after the collapse of the 1989 real estate bubble made it difficult for salaryman fathers to afford to move their whole families to urban centers where company headquarters are located. To cut costs they leave their families behind while working long periods of time in the city.