

PROLOGUE

You want to know when I first met him? Alright.

It was 7:42 p.m. on a Friday. I remember because the library clock was the only thing making noise, ticking like it had somewhere better to be. The place was almost empty—no whispers, no rustling pages—just the low hum of the lamps and the smell of old paper hanging in the air.

I was supposed to be leaving. My eyes were burning from reading too long, and my bag was already half-zipped. That's when I saw him.

Corner table by the hall exit. Same spot he'd been in when I arrived hours earlier. Laptop open, face caught in its glow. No coffee, no water, not even that absent minded stretch people do after sitting too long. Just stillness, except for his fingers hovering over the keyboard.

He didn't notice me. Not then, anyway. And honestly, I wasn't planning to notice him either. But there's a thing that happens when you see someone so locked in that the rest of the world feels irrelevant—you wonder what's on the other side of that focus.

I walked past him anyway. But curiosity is a bad habit of mine, and I wanted to see what had him staring at his laptop like the rest of the world didn't exist. So I slowed, just enough to glance at his screen. Code—messy, with a strip of red errors glowing at the bottom like a warning light.

The way he sat there reminded me of times I'd stuck on something I couldn't quite let go of. That mix of frustration and stubborn pride... I've worn that look myself, more times than I'd like to admit. And when you work as a TA, you start noticing it in other people too: the still posture, the fixed stare, the way someone keeps circling the same problem hoping it'll give in.

Usually, I only step in when I'm on the clock. But habits don't really care about office hours.

So I said something—just enough to pull him out of his bubble. He looked up like I'd caught him mid-dream, one headphone sliding off. His voice was low, a little rough, and there was

the start of a smile, like he wasn't sure yet if I was serious. I told him what I thought was wrong. He didn't argue, just nudged the laptop toward me, curious to see if I could back it up.

I could. A few clicks later, the errors were gone, replaced by clean output, and he was looking at me like he couldn't decide if he was more surprised by the fix or by me.

I didn't stick around to find out. Said something about not making a habit of it, and left him there under the lamplight. I think he called after me, something quick, but I was already halfway to the doors.

And maybe that should've been the end of it—just a stranger in a library with too much work and too little time. But I've learned that the smallest detours can start the longest roads.

I didn't know it then, but that night would lead to things I can't forget. And him? Well... he'd turn out to be a lot more than the guy at the corner table. In ways I wouldn't have believed if you'd told me that night.

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The sunlight coming through my curtains was dull, almost silver. My phone said 8:14. My brain said... go back to sleep.

I threw the covers off anyway, sat up, and rubbed the grit from my eyes. And there it was again — that stupid image from last night. The corner table. Hazel eyes. The laugh. I frowned at the floor. Why am I even thinking about him?

Mornings were usually my favorite: no one to question my late nights, my uneven stacks of notes, my nicotine habit. Just me, coffee, and a chance to pretend I had my life in perfect order. But today, the silence didn't feel peaceful—it felt like a stage waiting for someone to step onto it.

I cracked the window. Cool air slipped in, carrying a thread of jasmine from the park nearby my apartment. Pretty actually, but my first thought was that it meant allergy season was about to murder half the student body.

And my apartment was... fine. One bedroom, enough space for my desk without blocking the closet, and big windows that pretended to be generous with the light. During undergrad, I shared an apartment, learned how much I hated waiting for the bathroom and finding my leftovers mysteriously gone. After years of sharing undergrad apartments—splitting rent, fridge shelves, and passive-aggressive sticky notes—having my own key and my own quiet felt like a luxury. Now I lived alone, about thirty minutes from campus if I walked. The rent was steep for what it was, but between my TA work and the tuition scholarship, I could manage. Barely. Some months felt like a balancing act between rent, coffee, and pretending groceries counted as “meals.”

Enough.

I shuffled to the kitchen, still half in a dream, half in a haze. The counter was a mess. A jar of instant coffee shoved behind my actual coffee beans like it was something to be ashamed of. I ignored it, scooping the grounds with muscle memory. The drip machine gave its slow, impatient hiss, filling the air with that dark, bitter smell that meant I might actually be functional in fifteen minutes.

While it worked, I slid open the slim tin on the counter and pulled out a Sobranie Black Russian—black paper, gold foil filter, the kind of cigarette that looked like it belonged in a noir film. Too fancy for my budget, but I prefer a pack like this, when the usual grind needed a little theatre. I lit it, drawing in the sweet, spicy smoke. It was richer than the cheap stuff, almost luxurious.

It wasn't a habit I bragged about—more like a ritual I'd picked up when life got messy. Some people run. Some bake. I smoke and pretend it's problem-solving. The first drag loosened the knot in my chest, the one wound tight from too much studying and that stupid, unexpected spark from last night.

I exhaled toward the narrow kitchen window, watching the smoke twist and vanish. Just a guy who needed help. Nothing else. Not worth the replay my brain insisted on.

Coffee was ready. I poured it black, no sugar — anything else felt like lying to myself. The mug was warm in my right hand, the last inch of my Sobranie smoldering in the left. I leaned into the open window, elbows resting on the sill, and looked down at the street three floors below.

The morning air was cool enough to sting. I took a slow sip, then a drag, letting the heat and smoke knot together in my chest before sliding out on the exhale.

Behind me, my phone buzzed on the counter. Weather app. Rain by noon.

Fine. I'd go groceries, before the sky decided to make a point. The list was short and depressingly predictable: ramen, chocolate, coffee. Survival kit. Nothing green unless it came in a dehydrated block. I could already see myself weaving through the aisles, dodging slow walkers, getting trapped behind someone debating cereal like it was a moral decision.

Another sip, another drag. The clouds were rolling in, slow but certain, flattening the light in the street below.

Alright, Kasumi. Move. Rain waits for no one.

I stubbed out the cigarette, rinsed the mug, and shrugged into my jacket. The umbrella was propped by the door — black, compact, the kind that could survive exactly one gust of wind before flipping inside out. Still, better than nothing. I slipped it into my bag.

The hallway outside smelled faintly of fresh paint and my upstairs neighbor's overcooked eggs.

Outside, the street was damp from last night's rain, the asphalt slick enough to mirror the pale sky. Puddles pooled in uneven patches along the curb, catching glints of light where the clouds thinned. I tucked my hands into my jacket pockets and started toward the store, the umbrella handle bumping lightly against my hip with each step.

The thirty-minute walk cut through narrow backstreets I preferred for their quiet. No honking, no clusters of students clogging the sidewalk. Just the occasional cyclist gliding past, tires hissing over wet pavement, and the low murmur of a radio spilling from an open apartment window somewhere above.

My phone buzzed once in my pocket — a message I didn't bother checking. Morning errands didn't need company.

The walk ended at the edge of campus, the old brick façade of the student center looming like it had been waiting for me. The campus grocery was tucked inside — a narrow space with bright white lights and shelves that always seemed a little too full of things no one really needed.

Technically, everything here was free — “student food security program” — but you still had to sign in and pretend to be grateful while volunteers in neon lanyards hovered nearby. I grabbed a basket and headed in, ignoring the “fresh produce” table. The apples were the kind that looked fine until you bit into them and realized you'd been tricked.

I drifted through the aisles, my eyes skimming over the usual offenders. Instant oatmeal in flavors that tasted like regret. Cans of chickpeas that had probably been here since before I started grad school. A whole shelf of kale chips no one ever touched.

My basket stayed light: a pack of ramen, three dark chocolate bars and a bag of dried mango because sometimes you had to pretend you were making healthy choices. I passed on the peanut butter — they only had the crunchy kind, and I refused to deal with that texture first thing in the morning.

At the fridge section, I snagged a carton of milk. The expiration date was in two days, but that was future Kasumi's problem.

Halfway down the coffee aisle, something shifted in my vision — a quick movement, a clatter. I glanced over.

Him. Library guy.

He was crouched at the bottom shelf, sliding a jar of instant coffee into his basket. Headphones rested loose around his neck. His basket looked like a caffeine survival kit — two energy drinks and a dented thermos clinking together with each movement, a box of instant noodles wedged in sideways like it had barely made the cut.

He straightened, taller than I remembered, and for half a second his face went through the same thought process mine did: oh, it's you.... His hazel eyes caught the light, a flicker of

recognition passing before he smiled. Not fast, not polished — more like a smile that had snuck up on him.

And there it was again, that warm little drop in my chest I didn't ask for. Great. My grocery run just turned into a social experiment.

He straightened, spotting me almost instantly. That flicker of recognition crossed his face, followed by a slow, warm smile.

"You," he said, like he was still deciding if it was really me.

"Me," I said, shifting my basket.

His smile came slow, a little surprised. "Girl from the library yesterday."

I tilted my head. "Code still broken, or did it make it through the night?"

"It made it," he said. "Barely. Ten minutes before the deadline. Could've gone either way."

Figures. The guy looked focused enough to hack NASA, but apparently still lived on the edge of chaos.

"Could've fooled me," I said. "You looked about three minutes from throwing your laptop out the window."

That laugh again — warm, unpolished, the kind that made it too easy to remember the library light on his face.

As he shifted his basket, his jacket fell open just enough for me to catch the print on his T-shirt — the same department logo as mine. Computer Science. That explained the coding meltdown last night. Probably an undergrad.

"Yeah... probably wasn't my best moment," he said, still smiling

I glanced at his basket. "Energy drinks and noodles. Let me guess more all-nighters?"

He followed my gaze, the corner of his mouth quirking. "You could say that. Rain's coming. Figured I'd stock up before I got stuck inside again."

At least he was practical. My version of "stocking up" was sugar and denial.

"Smart." I held up the chocolate bar in my basket. "This is my survival kit. Everything else is optional."

His grin widened a little. "You sound like you've done this before."

"Grad school," I said with a shrug. "If I have caffeine and sugar, I can survive almost anything."

He leaned slightly against the shelf, shifting his basket to his other hand. "Guess we both have our coping methods. Though... last night, I was about ready to give up until you walked over."

Right place, right time — or just poor judgment on my part for letting curiosity win.

"Right place, right time," I said, keeping my eyes on the coffee shelf.

"Or" he said, voice lighter, "maybe I just looked desperate enough to get your attention."

I smirked despite myself. "Maybe." I shifted my basket toward the front of the store and then replied, "Well... see you around, I guess."

"Yeah," he said, a small smile still playing at the edges of his mouth. "See you."

I turned before that smile could do anything else to me, making my way to the folding table they called a checkout. The volunteer scanned my items without looking up, mumbling the standard "have a good day" in that checked-out tone that made it sound like a question. I stuffed the chocolate, coffee, and milk into my tote, the umbrella handle jutting out awkwardly.

Outside, the air had that damp heaviness that comes right before the sky gives in. By the time I reached the steps, the first drops were already spotting the pavement.

I pulled the umbrella from my tote and flicked it open. The black canopy rattled once in the breeze, the kind of warning that reminded me why I didn't trust the weather app in the first place. It was the same app that once promised me clear skies right up until the downpour.

Although rain stayed light, a soft patter against the fabric overhead as I started the walk home. Water gathered in the seams of the sidewalk, carrying stray leaves toward the gutter. That faint floral edge from the park drifted through the air, muted now by the smell of wet soil.

The thirty-minute walk trimmed itself down when I didn't stop for anything — no detours, no lingering at crosswalks. The streets were quieter now, most people already indoors, the sound of my boots muted by the slick pavement. Cars passed in slow, careful swishes, tires slicing through shallow puddles.

By the time I turned onto my block, the rain had thickened to a steady curtain. My umbrella held, though it tilted dangerously once when the wind caught it — a reminder that it was living on borrowed time.

Inside my apartment, the quiet was instant. I set the bag down on the counter, groceries spilling into the small space between the sink and the stovetop. Chocolate went straight into

the cupboard. Coffee to the shelf. Milk in the fridge. The umbrella leaned back against the door, still dripping.

I made to the window, watching as the rain streaked the glass in uneven trails. My reflection stared back — hair damp at the edges, sweater flecked with stray drops.

I told myself I wasn't thinking about him. Just another morning, another errand. Still, I caught myself replaying that moment in the aisle — the smile, the way his jacket shifted when he moved. Probably an undergrad, probably nothing. And yet that stuck just for a second longer than it should have.

I turned away, flicking on the kettle. Coffee could wait until tomorrow. Tonight, I just wanted the sound of rain filling the room.

Besides, people like him didn't usually cross my path twice.

I shifted the basket in my hand, the handles digging into my palm as I drifted toward the back of the store. Might as well make the trip worth it. Milk from the far end of the cooler — the one with the latest date. A pack of chicken, still icy against my fingers. A couple of vegetables I'd probably forget about until they went soft in the fridge.

Somewhere between the dairy aisle and the produce, her voice was still echoing in my head. Not the words — just the sound of it. I wondered if I'd said too much back there. Probably not. Maybe. Hard to tell with people you've just met. Not that it mattered. She wasn't anyone I needed to think about. If we crossed paths again, maybe I'd nod, maybe I wouldn't.

I cut the thought short and headed for the registers.

That's when I heard it — faint at first, blending in with the hum of the store — rain.

Wait, seriously? The weather report swore it wouldn't start raining until noon. I should've brought my umbrella. Now I'd have to walk back in it. Great. Not even proper rain, either just that thin drizzle that still soaks you through. The kind that makes your clothes stick and your shoes squeak, and somehow manages to find the exact spot on your neck that isn't covered. I hated that. Wet paths, slick steps, people with half-broken umbrellas taking up the whole sidewalk.

By the time I stepped up to the counter, she was already leaving. Her bag slung over her shoulder, one hand snapping an umbrella open with this smooth motion like she'd done it a thousand times.

I watched her walk out into the street. Probably the last time I'd see her. Then again, we'd managed to bump into each other twice in two days, not that it meant anything.

I set the basket down on the counter. The guy behind it couldn't have been older than twenty — hoodie under the store's apron, hair sticking out from under a backwards cap. He started scanning my stuff without much enthusiasm, then paused when he got to the two energy drinks.

"Yeah, uh... only one of these per person," he said, holding one up like it was a contraband weapon. "Campus policy. They think we're all gonna drop dead if we double up."

"Right. Forgot." I took it back and set it aside, no argument.

"Student ID?"

I fished it out of my wallet and slid it across. He scanned it, glanced at the screen, and gave a small nod. "Yup, you're good to go."

I pocketed the card, took the bag, and stepped toward the exit, already bracing myself for that first hit of damp air waiting on the other side of the door. It caught me off guard — cool against my face, the drizzle already working through my hoodie before I'd even taken two steps

I fixed my gaze on the pavement. Routine was the only thing still holding me together. I pulled the grocery bag in close and started down the sidewalk, the smell of wet concrete and cut grass hanging in the air.

The campus was quieter than usual; weekend mornings always were. Rainwater gathered in shallow puddles along the path, shimmering under the grey light. I passed the student dorms, their brick walls darkened from the weather, windows glowing faintly from inside.

"LIO"

The voice cut through the steady patter, bright enough to make me turn. I hadn't heard my nickname since yesterday, yet it still hit like a friendly flare. She broke from her group near the dorm entrance and jogged over — **Mina**, backpack slung over both shoulders, umbrella tilted above her, rain sliding neatly off its edge. Her hair caught the grey light in a way that made it seem warmer than the air around us, and there was this easy brightness in her eyes that made the drizzle feel a little less miserable. Mina had always been like that — walking into a scene and making it lighter without trying.

"Get under here before you get soaked," she said, lifting the umbrella toward me.

I stepped closer, my shoes slipping just enough on the wet pavement to make me catch my balance. The rain eased as I moved under the umbrella, replaced by the softer sound of drops tapping overhead. Up close, I caught a faint scent something clean, maybe citrus — and an ease in her expression that made it seem like she'd been expecting me all along.

"Morning," I said. She met my eyes with that half-curious, half-amused look, damp wisps of hair clinging to her temples, and her smile still landed like a small burst of sunlight.

She adjusted the umbrella to cover us both. "You're lucky I'm nice," she said, looking at the bag in my hand. "Otherwise I'd make you pay for this spot."

I glanced at her. "Rent? You running some kind of umbrella business now?"

"Depends," she said, tilting the umbrella just enough to let a drop of rain hit my shoulder before swinging it back over. "If you've got chocolate in that bag, I'll waive the fee."

"Groceries," I said. "Milk, coffee, chicken and vegetables I'll probably forget about until they go bad."

She smirked and slid a hand into her backpack as we walked, the rain tapping a steady rhythm above us. Without looking at me, she pulled out a protein bar and held it out like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I eyed it, then her. "What's this? You're prescribing snacks now?"

"Nope," she said, her tone light but certain. "But you got that 'skipped breakfast' face."

I took it, brushing her fingers for half a second before the chill air claimed the space again. "That's... a very specific diagnosis."

"Somebody's got to take care of you," she said, adjusting the umbrella so it covered us both a little more.

She wasn't wrong. Unless burnt coffee and half a stale granola bar count, I'd skipped it entirely. My stomach was on her side, but telling her that would've been surrender. And the truth was, it wasn't really about the protein bar — it was her saying it. The casual way she stepped in like it was the most natural thing in the world, how she could make it sound like a joke and still mean it. Mina had a way of slipping into your day and making it feel less like fighting through the rain, and more like you'd been walking with her the whole time.

We fell into step without talking about where she was headed. The rain narrowed to a steady hiss above us, pooling along the edges of the path.

"Hospital?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, quick but easy, like it was the answer most days. "I'm already running late."

A tiny stethoscope charm dangled from her keychain, swinging with each step, catching a blink of grey light before disappearing again. I reached out and nudged it with my knuckle. "You still carry that thing? I thought you lost it."

She glanced down, a small smile tugging at her mouth before she looked back up at me. "It did. Took me forever to get it back. Can't lose my lucky charm. You practically went bankrupt at the ring-toss trying to win it for me, remember?" Her smile widened, the kind that made it hard to tell if she was teasing or holding onto the memory.

Freshman-year carnival lights came back in flashes but mostly, I remembered her. The way she leaned against the booth, arms folded, eyes tracking every throw with that patient, amused smile. How she laughed when I missed, not in a mean way, but like she was in on

some joke I hadn't caught yet. And then that last toss, the ring sliding home — and her whole face changing in an instant, surprise breaking into a grin so bright it drowned out everything else. She'd taken the prize in both hands like it was the only thing she wanted that night, and that look had stayed with me.

"Guess I just wanted to impress you," I said before I could think better of it.

"You did," she said, voice softer than the rain. Then the teasing edge slipped back in. "Though I'm less impressed you've forgotten how to eat breakfast."

She angled the umbrella toward the street and started walking. I just shifted the grocery bag in my hand and fell into step beside her. My left shoulder stayed dry under the umbrella's arc, but my right arm caught the cool brush of drizzle every time a gust angled in. Her sleeve brushed mine now and then, quick little contacts that disappeared as soon as they happened.

"Rotations are brutal," she sighed, tilting the umbrella slightly as we turned toward the bus stop. "One patient swore his stiff neck was meningitis. Turns out..." she tipped her head, eyes glinting, "it was a bad pillow." Her laugh was soft but real, and it slipped under the rain like it belonged there. I caught myself smiling back before I even thought about it. Then she added, with a quick wink, "Meanwhile you're out here dying of caffeine overdose."

"Assignments," I muttered. "They don't end."

A city bus hissed to a stop beside the med building, brakes whining against the wet pavement. She hitched the strap of her tote higher, and when she spoke again, "I'm on call till midnight. Don't make me worry about you while I'm stitching people up."

"Me? I'm low-maintenance," I said.

Without a word, she offered me the umbrella. "You've got the long walk to home ahead"

She pressed it against my chest before I could speak. "Keep it. I've got the bus roof."

"Mina, you're soaked already—"

"Don't argue, Lio." Her hand stayed on the handle for a moment, fingers warm through the chill, her eyes holding mine with something I couldn't quite pin down. Concern, maybe... or something else I wasn't ready to name. Then it was gone, replaced by that grin again. "Text me you survived when you get home, all right? And eat that bar. Future doctor's orders."

I smirked. "Bossy."

She tapped a finger to her forehead in mock salute, then turned and stepped onto the bus.

Through the rain-streaked glass, she glanced back — just long enough for me to catch the faint smile, almost hidden by the fogged window. The doors closed, and the bus pulled away.

I stood there longer than I needed to, the umbrella still in my hands, feeling like it was worth more than it should have been.

I walked home under Mina's umbrella, stepping around puddles while the rain pattered softly on the fabric above. Staying dry wasn't really the point — it felt more like she'd handed it to me on purpose, expecting me to bring it back.

By the time I reached the apartment, it was warm inside, smelling faintly of garlic and the low simmer of tomatoes. Dad had rented us this flat when Hori and I moved here for school — a two-bedroom with creaky floors, thin walls, and just enough space to call home. They still dropped by sometimes, but mostly it was just the two of us, figuring out how to share a roof without killing each other. Better that than some stranger who'd leave passive-aggressive sticky notes about unwashed dishes.

I shook the water from the umbrella and set it by the door before it could drip onto the rug.

Hori was at the stove, wooden spoon in hand, her dark hair loosely knotted at the back of her neck. She glanced over her shoulder when the door clicked shut, one eyebrow lifting like she'd been waiting to make a comment the second I walked in.

"You're late," Hori's voice from the kitchen, cutting through the hush like she'd been waiting. "Again."

I followed the smell into the kitchen and found her stirring a pot of sauce in slow, practiced circles. She wore her usual Saturday morning ensemble — an oversized concert tee from before I was born, plaid pajama pants cuffed above the ankle, and mismatched socks (one of which had given up entirely and sprouted a hole near the toe). Her hair was held together with two old chopsticks, stabbed through like the final insult.

She didn't look at me at first, just kept stirring like she already knew the whole story.

"Let me guess. Long line at the store? Or..." she paused, turned slightly, and caught sight of the umbrella still shedding quiet drops by the door, "...you got adopted by a med student."

I dropped the grocery bag on the counter with a soft thud. "None of those are wrong."

"That's Mina's, isn't it?" she asked, finally abandoning the spoon to grab a towel. She wiped her hands as she looked at me — not accusing, just curious, like someone watching a familiar character finally take a new step.

"She insisted," I said, peeling off my damp jacket.

Hori smirked, the kind that said she was already filing this away for future teasing. "Of course she did."

Our place wasn't big, but it had that lived-in kind of comfort — the kind built from mismatched mugs in the cupboard, a sagging couch we kept swearing we'd replace, and fridge magnets from places neither of us had actually visited. Living with Hori meant the place was rarely quiet, but in a good way. The kind of way where silence felt like something was missing.

She leaned against the counter now, eyeing me like she was weighing how much trouble to cause.

"You know, there's a difference between borrowing someone's umbrella and borrowing their heart."

I shot her a look as I unpacked the groceries. "You've been waiting all day to say that, haven't you?"

"Maybe," she said, turning back to the stove, shoulders shaking in a silent laugh.

I pulled out the usuals — milk, eggs, instant noodles, and the mint gum she always managed to steal from me. I slid it toward her without comment. She caught it midair, already unwrapping it like it was her reward for putting up with me.

"She just didn't want it getting in the way," I added, quieter now. "Nothing more."

Hori leaned her elbows on the counter, chin resting in her palms. "Uh-huh. And I suppose next time she's going to give you her stethoscope and ask you to take care of it until she graduates."

"Do you ever get tired of narrating my life like it's a teen drama?"

"No," she said, all too cheerfully. "It's the only thing keeping me sane during midterm season."

"I'm not—" I started, but she cut me off by shoving a warm bowl into my hands.

"Eat," she said firmly, in the exact tone our mother used when she wasn't up for debate. "Maybe carbs will help you see reason."

We sank onto the couch, bowls balanced on our knees, the tomato sauce still steaming in the shallow curve of the pasta. For a few minutes, there was only the soft scrape of forks, the steady tapping of rain against the windows, and the hum of something almost like peace.

I felt Hori glance at me once — that quiet, sideways glance you only notice when someone knows you too well. I didn't meet her eyes. Just kept eating.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I muttered eventually, standing to gather the bowls. Her silence followed me to the sink, but it didn’t feel empty. If anything, it said more than she would’ve bothered to.

In my room, the quiet felt heavy. My phone buzzed softly from the desk, breaking the momentary stillness. Mina’s name lit up the screen, half scolding, half affectionate, wanting proof I’d eaten the protein bar and hadn’t tossed it like last time. I placed the phone down, smiling to myself. Mina’s umbrella stood guard by my chair, water droplets still clinging to its edges like quiet reminders.

As I stared at the code blinking on my screen, a different memory elbowed its way in — not Mina, but her. The girl from the coffee aisle. I hadn’t even asked for her name. I didn’t know why that bothered me now. I shook it away, fingers settling over the keys.

Focus.

Just coincidence. Just a glitch in the routine.