## THIRTY YEARS LATER

(Everything and nothing under the tissue paper)

"It's as though there's another me under the tissue paper of my first Papier Froissé, who, since then, from there, sees the world, reflects, is moved by or laughs about the way I feel about art and all other biographic movements. My conversation with him – before there had only been my monologues – materialised one night, studded by the hoots of barn owls, thirty years after the first crumpling of paper for Papassian use; and I gained solace from it and a sort of meditated madness on how much leads to an artistic life spent like mine in the provinces, near stretches of water, earlier on that of Torre del Lago Puccini and then that of Bracciano. There you are, if you want to write about me and my biography, keep in mind this *duo* that has modulated night-time words, honouring, in its own way, the beginning".

This is what the painter said to me as we stood before the painting. And I accepted the challenge and made a *biographic dialogue* of it. Velinato is the *presence* under the crinkled tissue of the ovoid circle. Papasso is the painter who is intent on matters that link psychological elements with shrewd moves of the senses: under the studio roof, under the Roman sky, under his dream, who discovers the words of *another* him, a sharp interpreter. And scathing too, because he draws on phantom resources of the duo.

Claudio Di Scalzo

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**PAPASSO**: Can you remember when I was born?

**VELINATO:** No, I can't remember, I don't care, a painter is born when he creates his first original work, and your date of birth and mine are those of this papier froissé: that is to say 1975; the rest is your business, including the crying in the Florentine cradle. This evening, not being tired, I'm ready to talk about the invention of creased paper and dotted crosses. A magic moment that gave me a new home and the iridescent virtue of a voice from the deep. Try and summarize...

PAPASSO: There are so many years to tell you about. I recall my parents, how tall they seemed to me when I was little. Like a forest of looks bearing down me. Sometimes frowning. You know very well that my mother was a sergeant major. You can remember too that I was ten years old when the Allies massaged the backs of the living and of roofs with bombs, every night. And if you grow up with explosions, when you approach art some blinding light will have entangled your perceptions.

**VELINATO:** Don't be so dramatic. It was the lack of bread, during the war and after it, that left its mark on people: their stomachs and innards. Sum it all up, I know you won't tell me anything about your feelings and the first time you tasted Eve's fruit. You put a dark curtain over that like your experimentations. Let's say that this is the humus that fertilised your sign.

**PAPASSO:** I breath a sigh of relief. Let's accept the idea about artistic birth and from there onwards let's chat. In any case, I want you to know that the years before my artistic commitment had their own brilliance!

**VELINATO**: Oh yes, of course they did, you sold the first televisions and repaired monitors.

PAPASSO: Is that something to be ashamed of? I was a technician. I had a safe future handling electrical appliances. But I was like he who, being an expert on horse-drawn carriages, accepts, though perplexed, the advent of the combustion engine. I had to continually keep myself up to date. I realised I wanted a trade that was valid for life. And I was disturbed by that compressed world behind the screen and its ability to rule. That's why I went in search of painting, colour, pictures created from the inspiration of my way of thinking, much better than those families excited by some dancer on Canzonissima (popular television programme) or thrown into raptures by Alberto Lupo's acting. It was time I made a choice.

**VELINATO:** You couldn't put it off any longer! You were coming up to forty. Eh! don't go. I won't remind you of your first marriage or other goings on that led you away from Viareggio, where you used to live. Well, if one at a certain moment feels the longing to be a nomad and sets out for foreign lands, even if it's only the sea between Marina di Pisa and Torre del Lago Puccini, I mean that of Vecchiano, he follows the scent of the choice invented by Gaugin: he too, was already *formed* when he left his business position and the Danish woman. You were responding to a sort of romanticism. Which made you swelter and your teeth chatter.

**PAPASSO:** How caustic you are. Sometimes I wonder how you can harbour so much ruthlessness under your smoothness and harmony. Your words are scathing.

**VELINATO:** You've probably poured the acids that you use, in my tissue buried language. Are you saying that the farmhouse, where you lived for most of the seventies, was comfortable? There was no heating apart from that of the faggots in the fireplace, and in August the prints got curled up in the loft. So, let's reveal to ourselves that we suffered for art: that we weren't, or rather you weren't a dandy, who played at being bohemian with

Daddy's cheque. You decided to make a living out of your painting, which in the beginning wasn't a flash of novelty. It seems to me.

PAPASSO: I was landed in a tradition. My soul needed an objective correlation, - oh, don't be ironic, I used to read Eliot and Pound - which I found in the feverish subject of informal abstractionism. Poetry that told of epos and painting that investigated the ambiguity of reality were my food. But I was trying to invent, along the edges of this current, which was already a vulgate, a recognisable contribution. I invented totemic sinuosities and psychological compounds in order to paint the visionarity I had lived towards the female universe. Picasso too had inoculated me with the suggestion that I should erase what I loved at first sight, in order to obtain a rubble-like form of the synthesis of the anguish of living. Yes, it was probably as you say a Vechianese existentialism amongst the maize, but I felt I would arrive at an original sign.

**VELINATO:** All this heroism – and you were obviously leafing through poets and painters who, either with myth or with tauromacchias, celebrated the veil of reality – it seems to me you were going round and round a phrase of the detached Argan, who you would then have met in Rome, which said "It's not painting that represents reality, but reality that represents painting".

PAPASSO: See how learned you are! I didn't even know this quote. During this experimentation period of mine I was undergoing formation eh..eh.. I have a sense of humour too, in fact I spent hours in the Uffizi studying Masters such as Piero della Francesca and Botticelli. Perhaps those bodies, their human softness and the spasms of their faces, and the cheering parts of divinity then crucified, inspired in me human passing on earth, leading me on to a kind of genealogical mysticism. The idea of dealing with genealogy with signs was born. Thinking back on it, I meant it both as a descent of the descendants and as the evolution of the sign in continual metamorphosis.

**VELINATO:** Apart from the silent teachings of the masters at the Uffizi, did you have any masters to teach you the *abc* of engraving and painting? Or did pictorial science seep into you like the pictures in the cathode ray tube?

**PAPASSO:** When I was in Viareggio, so before the existential *gauginism* as you call it, I went to night school where a certain Professor Bucci treated me as if he had to redeem a man who had foolishly dedicated himself to technique rather than to muses. He was a Crocian. I remember him as being the first gardener who was curious about my late-blossoming talent.

**VELINATO:** Well said. And after that you withdrew to the farmhouse in the Pisa area.

PAPASSO: In the Vecchiano area to be precise. The farmhouse was the property of Count Massarosa who looked as though he had stepped out of a verist novel. A gentleman who owned land, a lot of land, and animals, very many of them, and farmers, a number of them who worked for his bank account. In the beginning he was a little suspicious about entrusting me with the farmhouse, but then gave in, satisfied at the idea of having an artist as a guest. The place was called Malaventre, an area of Migliarino Pisano on the Aurelia Road, because in medieval times there had been a plague which affected the belly and led to death.

**VELINATO**: So in Malaventre the painter got over his heartaches.

PAPASSO: I've already told you that I don't want to be sentimental about the biographical facts. Ah, you spoke badly to the aesthetic heart: that palpitated as it wished. It raced. The *illness* was the attempt to invent the universe with a paintbrush and turpentine. Immersed in a poplar grove, my studio welcomed natural events as easily as a nest multiplies its layers of down. In that solitude, I opened myself up to a syllabified promise, who knows when, do you know anything about it?, to follow my vital instinct and this was worth more than any past nuptial yes (I do). I could see my calendar marked by art. I stuck to my impulses on the purity side. Perhaps I was young for the first time: although I was the age you mentioned.

**VELINATO:** Ooh. And you don't want to allow yourself to be sentimental? You're scattering kilos of it. Should I think that besides his Crocian idealism, good old Bucci gave you Bergson transfusions? Among other things a kind of Marxism, that was not very kind to individualist dreamers, circulated in those years.

PAPASSO: You're right. It was an orthodox Marxism. Which in art, at least in Tuscany, preached dogmas of socialist realism. At the most Guttuso. So with my artistic results I appeared to be dangerously modern, while in other latitudes, as you know, let's say Milan and Rome, conceptual art was in full swing in all its variations. Those with little alcohol too, you mean? Oh yes, you're right. In any case I have to deny there were prejudiced closures. I was very much helped by the left-wing administration, especially in Vecchiano. Where I exhibited my production in 1976.

**VELINATO:** You swam against the current. You purchased a chalcographic press and you began to challenge the noble engraving tradition.

**PAPASSO:** In 1975, I had my first one-man show at *II Salotto* gallery with my pictures painted also in a symbolic way. Oils. I cared a lot about Mario Radice's encouragement. And the call of engraving was a way to gather myself together in an infinitely small dimension and *think* big. A break. I

should have received suggestions from engraving to go ahead with my research. Tired of the violence inflicted on form, I turned my thoughts to a formative art. In terms of composition. But you don't acquire a little poetic knowledge beforehand and then spread it on your work. The combinations came about through the folds of experience. If a painter attempts this undertaking, if he manages to feel them, they are always verbal and expressed by signs: the artistic invention comes on its own, enchanting and very close, when it can't be said in any other way.

**VELINATO:** You read that somewhere! Have you prepared this conversation with me? In my first collection, this stream of novelty wasn't yet there. I mean the "Genealogy" portfolio.

PAPASSO: In accompanying the portfolio, Aldo Cairola, beyond the easy references to the archetype and all the branches that genealogy proposes to the nerves and features, he recognised that I had worked in all the phases of its realisation relying on my own strength, and I liked that. My acid-burnt hands were proof. And my watering eyes stung by the fumes, while the healthy procedure scratched the indolence of the spirit. I was an artisan, in the highest sense of the term, just that instead of tight ening valves on televisions I was inventing my interior alphabet. I was happy. I also wrote a few lines on the engraving world. Elated.

**VELINATO:** Can you remember some of them? Come on, declaim them. We're on our own.

**PAPASSO:** Do you really want me to? I've hidden them in Kandinskij's "Spiritual in Art": it seemed a suitable place. I'll read it then.

Will these lines deceive my gaze

Engraved in the matrix because each allusion to the symbol be vehement And the feeling they hide from me appears to others? Engraving the other way round to represent things Is as though I built the word to make myself understood.

Do you like it? It's in praise of etching! And in its procedure by cutting, keeping in mind that if you want to represent the reality of the landscape, the interior too, this has to be engraved the other way round, because the direct printing gives a mirror image.

Do you mean that if we're here chatting, it's because I'm an expert chalcographer with all the ins and outs, spiritual ones too?

**VELINATO:** It could be: after all, without your graphic experience you wouldn't have crushed a piece of tissue paper. But your writing doesn't seem so obscure. Read me another piece: the one dedicated to etching.

**PAPASSO:** You simulate gouache and watercolour allied with sugar and Greek pitch, you are the beginning of the fever *tingling and porous, but you hide the lean future of my arm.* 

**VELINATO:** This piece is incomprehensible. It would be better if you used burins and sheets of copper, instead of a ball-point pen and a sheet of an exercise book. Believe me. Come on, don't be angry. I know you reflected over the plate conceptualising it when Kosuth-style *art is idea* was becoming the rage, but don't try to be intellectual, stay the provident farmer who marks the essential in the rhythms of the seasons. Imagine that pink is pink and that's all and that the intense black of watercolour is intense black and that's all.

PAPASSO: You're right. What counted in those years was the invention of papier froissé signed AP. I started stretching tissue over supports that had been previously filled with embroidered signs. It seemed as though they were little gestures with which I could compose a different pictorial time. And if words invent senses, I, with this hiding, thought I had invented a sign that held together the visible and the memory of each semblance of reality. I daydreamed in search of confirmation. I reached the ovoid form because I was looking for timelessness. I did it shyly. The tissue papers fitted together also with a few gestural twistings derived from the seventies oil paintings. Pure fervour. In fact white and pearl grey valences dominated the first papiers froissés. Colour was almost absent.

**VELINATO:** This was also all your possible conceptualism. I think.

PAPASSO: You're right. At the end of the seventies the use of colour was taboo for the conceptuals in circulation. But I went my own way. I held an important exhibition at the Galleria Zarathustra in Milan, in May 1979. The critics analysed my painting which was not possible to catalogue in a style, and the first crumpled papers. And on re-reading those contributions, that of the poet Roberto Sanesi moves me. He was familiar with metaphysics and knew how to interpret my anxieties reducing them to the syntax of a poem expressed through colour. With him I would make the *Stultifera* portfolio. I was inside a weaving of emotions. What did you say? Of feelings too?

**VELINATO**: You've got it right! Didn't you leave the farmhouse and your life as a loner in those late seventies?

**PAPASSO:** An apartment I owned along the riverside road in Pisa became free. And I was counting on the one below, where I could have my studio and move the press to, becoming fit for habitation within a short period. I moved. The change was that Monika Krumpen became my partner. She

was of German origin. This relationship and marriage brought two children into my life: Talitho and Andolin. And a third one too, I have to say, Vlado, who I brought up as if he were my own and who my partner had had with her first husband. I'll list the whole development of myself as a father figure. I won't go back over it. I'm warning you. Although later on we'll talk about the years I spent in Anguillara Sabazia, on Lake Bracciano, near Rome.

**VELINATO:** Let's go back to the discovery of Papier froissé. And its egg shape. Tell me something more than what I can read in the essay Dorfles wrote for your exhibition, again in the Zarathustra in 1981, where this very pictorial technique was at the centre of his reflection.

PAPASSO: Dorfles, with his incomparable writing – and he was to present me again in Rome in 1989 – reflected on the ego being interpreted as an egg, on the laceration, on the inside and outside, and on how I inserted heterogeneous material consisting of pieces of lace. Actually, he put some questions to me. He didn't know you were already under the tissue. However, if you really want to know the truth on why I chose an egg, I'll pour it all out to you.

**VELINATO:** This is just the right kind of night for that. When the sky is resting on the crest of the hills, does your soul calmly sustain the truth too?

PAPASSO: Leave the soft soap out of it. I would talk to you even if outside climatic disasters were being hurled upon us. The world being born from an egg is common to many cultures: from the Alps to the Aegean to the Land of the Rising Sun. I've always played about with symbols. As a child I used to leaf through an old encyclopaedia on myths. I wondered, as I cut the tissue paper to place on the canvas, whether such transparent eggs could be fertilised by my signs and hints of colour. Seminal colour. You gave me a positive answer. I was, do you understand?, making up a personal and confused mythograph. I was comforted by telling myself that if the egg contained a multiplicity of beings and future genealogies, then perhaps it could take care of dreams too, what's hidden from us, and I ventured to make the composition that you know. This *crumpled paper*, to which I've given a French name, was to become your home! I discovered it could contain something similar to a double. Even though you reject that definition, because you're something that could be all or nothing compared to me.

**VELINATO:** Go on. I not going to tell you what I am. I don't even know myself. And so we are equal. All I can tell you, as we're talking about eggs, is that perhaps you're my hen.

PAPASSO: Ha ha ha ha!

**VELINATO:** Hey, don't choke yourself, continue. Otherwise you'll lose your thread.

**PAPASSO:** I thought, still following my modest symbology, that if the egg comes after chaos and represents a first differentiation, for me this was the way of escape from informal signs, then there were too many debtors from other artistic experiences. Papasso's egg was unique and multiple at the same time. Diaphanous and dark.

VELINATO Give me some examples.

PAPASSO: Ah, the examples are not only in painting, you already now about the modulations I have made of it, going towards colour in the eighties and afterwards. The egg has invaded my privacy too. How? Soon said: it symbolises the home, rest, the nest. But if you give yourself to this partition, the being is partly chained up. You become fantasy's bourgeoisie: whimsical in slippers. And don't tell me I haven't aspired to this too, especially since I've resided in Latium. My home, such hard work to build, has also been a refuge in the bucolic peace of painting and kitchen garden. But the part of me, that the egg contains, of adventure, challenge and nomadism has been sedated. I should have broken the egg. I should have given you a way to escape too. I didn't do it. And it was because of this that I became ill. I know.

**VELINATO**: Forget these ASL (local health authority) like results. On the riverside road in Pisa, in the early eighties, you were like a spring and your long nose allowed you to sniff out unpublished exchanges with the masters of Group 63 and with experimental poetry.

**PAPASSO:** There's not much to joke about regarding my illnesses. You're immune to them. But I have suffered and I still haven't recovered. However, I'll tell you about my Pisa years, which weren't just painting and engraving.

**VELINATO:** You don't think I'm so cynical as not to be supportive, when you were at the end of a bed convinced you weren't going to survive, but this evening I have to energetically address the memories of your aesthetic adventure. And if you want to tell me about your amorous memories in Pisa, I'll willingly listen.

PAPASSO: The Arno, which I could see from my window, flowed quietly by in the company of small boats. I was in the city that, due to my involvement in Romanesque, was like a mother to me. The noise of the cars, the yelling of consumerism, the modernity that stunned each perfect valence of the buildings of Borgo Stretto with its brutal signboards – I ignored all that. I used to go out for walks with my partner on certain nights when the light seemed

liquid and each architrave appeared as a suitable shelter for what our eyes could contain. I was in love. The loneliness of the farmhouse had become a memory. Even though I sensed that a new partner, an adopted son and Talitho, my new born son, would have imposed other duties upon me and other rhythms on my artistic path. Less heroic, more thought out, less egoistic. Meanwhile I could feel the warmth of a family.

**VELINATO:** That of the artistic community of Pisa too?

PAPASSO: The artists of Pisa were distrustful, but at the same time curious. They had their associations. Malicious gossip and small passions of the province. Friendships were like those of the thirties. And the local critics too were cautious in dealing with novelties that were becoming all the rage beyond the boundaries of 'Pisaness'. But I didn't notice, I was so absorbed with my engraving experiments: I had printed "Canta" in 1981 and Re/Spira, which today is in new York's MoMA, was coming into being and would have intertwined its experimental breath with that of Sanguineti which was equally as engraving. But those who discovered its growth were characters in the room where I turned the roller of the press, who had experienced all possible imaginary revolutions, from those of '68 to those of '77, and who in the "return" approached art so as to detoxify themselves from brief utopian passions, finished elsewhere in the gulag.

**VELINATO:** You practice popular sociology, as in a "cultural investigation" programme. That way you'd go back to the electrical appliances you started with, and this time inside them. Eh eh. Tell me about Sanguineti and your relations with other exponents of avant-guarde Italian literature. What did they find in you?

PAPASSO: After a few exhibitions in Genoa, Trento and Bologna, I had decided to totally isolate myself in an in-depth study of drawing and painting. And not to have any more exhibitions. The engraving work with Sanguineti had something to do with this choice. And also that of "Racconto" with Giulliani. Are you asking me what Sanguineti meant to me?

**VELINATO:** If you want to open yourself up...

PAPASSO: I'm not so familiar with the history of poetry, but even someone like me, a self-taught man, can see that the verses of the poet from Genoa have revolutionised static Italian poetry. I don't think they have forgiven him for it. And the same goes for his coherence with Marxism. So many of those revolutionaries of '68 finished up as repenters in reactionary newspapers, but he has been coherent, book after book. His liking for playing on words, acrostics, stylistic paradoxes, perhaps he saw, or sees - as on other occasions he came back to give me the gift of his collaboration - in my art

an amusing way of having a further opportunity for his words and my signs. I can't theorize any more than that.

**VELINATO**: Your everyday life was committed to a sort of innovative movement too.

PAPASSO: The family was thinking of moving to Anguillara Sabazia. And of buying a house, or at least finishing it, as it seemed from contacts we had with the estate agent's. My partner insisted on the possibility of having a house and some land to work on. Her vocation for green radicalism was exiting her. And I was tired of living on the fourth floor, with my studio underneath on the third floor. I was seeking new stimuli in Rome, also due to the contacts I had with Giulio Carlo Argan. When we moved, Lalo, a friend of mine from Vecchiano, helped us with his lorry. The journey from Pisa to Anguillara on his OM 42 was a medley of strange ideas. I had an incipient homesickness for the lovely Tuscan vocabulary I was leaving behind, as I was about to flow into the Roman one. But the sinuosity of the hills of Tuscia matched the undulating sign of my papiers froissés, and I let myself go, towards this new adventure.

**VELINATO:** Which was of brickwork too. Or am I mistaken? I remember the house was lacking windows and wiring and plumbing. You brought out your resourcefulness and did all the work possible with your then wife. You built walls, you planed, you nailed, you hoed the land, you sewed seeds and then worn out you went into your studio. I had a kind of religious admiration for you. Perhaps memories of Millais's farm-workers. Did Argan know you were using the burin and the trowel at the same time?

PAPASSO: Of course he did! That's where his respect for me originated from. He followed me between 1983 and 1985, while I was printing the portfolio "Forma Naturae (Archetipi & C.)". He interpreted my shapes as *poetic graphics*. We used to meet often, but I was aware of his unhappiness in the last few years of his life. I had better be quiet. My respect for an ingenious art historian tells me I have to be.

**VELINATO:** Respect! Rubbish! You're not talking to a journalist, who's going to shout what you say across the front page. I have to know too. Your career has something to do with it, doesn't it? And the subsequent choices. Uhmmm. We are going to discover the mysteries of Roman cultural politics.

PAPASSO: Argan thought my research in the field of graphics was profoundly innovative; and also in the paintings where the papiers froissés appeared to be invigorated by incunabula of colour. The images suggested dynamic thrills through the space of the painting and Argan, who had always admired historic avant-gardes, appreciated this subtle way of mine

of proposing echoes of them. Unfortunately political disappointments and an incident involving false Modigliani works had left their mark on this man and just when he lost his partner, he was tormented by the first symptoms of illness. In short, he was surrounded by a panorama of grief. He couldn't help me as much as he wanted. His suggestion that Calvesi included me in the biennale was not acknowledged and the exhibition, which was already on the National Calchographic calendar of events, brought no consequences. He concluded that his influence had weakened. I made light of my disenchantment. I didn't mention the matter again.

**VELINATO:** You isolated yourself even more. Knowing you...

PAPASSO: What an enlightening! You remember my monologues in the studio. I widened my relationships around the graphic continent: especially with Sanguineti, producing the portfolio "Promemoria" and "Una mina nella memoria", a sort of work in several parts put together with Elio Filippo Accrocca and carried out involving Sanguineti, DiScalzo, Madrignani, Remotti and Alliprandi. They organised the exhibitions for me, but I didn't even go to the opening ceremonies. I had exhibitions in Germany and in Central European strips: Hamburg, Budapest, Lubjana, and along the Seine and then in Rome again at the Charlton Gallery and in Bracciano. But the more the paintings circulated the more I closed myself up in my studio. And you know that!

**VELINATO:** I don't know why you started signing yourself as Antigone. You've kept it hidden from me. Explain yourself! I'm almost jealous of this feminine pseudonym. And worried about you. If Antigone accompanies the blind Edipo in search of his son, is it that this Roman Antigone accompanies Papasso in his search of his real artistic expression not yet seen as having been fulfilled?

PAPASSO: The marriage of psychoanalysis and myth adapts to everything like soap on the skin. It's true I wear glasses but, if I may, I can see my beauty. My explanation is more terrestrial and less mythological. Antigone is the other face of the artistic planet which spins around my brain. It's a benevolent coming and going between non-figurative and figurative. But you don't know the story of his artistic concretisation. I owe it to Picasso. I've already told you I used to read his writings in the farmhouse at Malaventre. One day I came across this phrase: "I've never seen colours fight each other". So then I included contrasting and clashing coloured pieces inside country scenes and on classically running horses' tails. I worked in the same way in graphic work too. Cows, farmhouses on hills, "stained" with surreal colours, they taught me that the absurd acquired value, of beauty and ugliness together too, in its coming to be. The exercises I had done with good old Bucci proved useful, they gained value when my career in the

history of the abstract sign had reached its zenith. It was enough to unite the figurative with the waste products of abstraction: a bolder cut or an experimentalism deposited on the hooves of running horses or Kandinskian triangles under contorted birch branches. Antigone's success lies in this acquired paradox. And I was able to feel like a farm-worker who sews seeds and waits.

**VELINATO:** All very Virgilian: I am touched. I didn't think that Antigone presided over so much experimentalism. My psycho-analytical surmises on your need to be accompanied half blind on a female arm have failed. If Antigone is the protagonist of a real pictorial revival in the circuit of your imagination – and I suspect that the geneology of ancestral engravers in that of Tuscany inspired you to evoke him as a pseudonym – I'm happy about that.

**PAPASSO:** Under this name I drew fifteen year old Talitho and new born Andolin who was kicking his legs. As you can see the family album has come into the art linked to Antigone.

**VELINATO**: So I can stay here serenely under the tissue paper, knowing that your artistic adventure allows you to wear the shoes of the Master of abstraction and rural figurative. If I could I would embrace you and be touched.

**PAPASSO**: Maybe it would be better not to! We could live in osmosis and become one. It's better to stay like this. Art unites us anyway. Goodnight.