



# The Surreal Life of George Papadopoulos

Russiagate felon.  
Hollywood denizen. Friend  
of Tom Arnold. Is there  
anything more 2019?

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**T**his is a story about stories. Most of them are crazy. Some of them are true. I first met George Papadopoulos, the unlikely

trigger of an investigation that many thought would take down Donald Trump, on a balmy California day in December 2018, less than a week after his release from federal prison. He wore a gray suit, a white shirt and a maroon tie, and greeted me with a cheery handshake. He asked about my flight and told me how much he was enjoying life in Los Angeles so far. “I thought people might be hostile,” he said as we took an elevator to the Rooftop Grill at the nearby Montage hotel. Instead, “they’re just intrigued. Basically, ‘Hi, nice to meet you, cool story.’” We took a seat at an outdoor table, and he ordered a cafe Americano and a “Green Vitality” smoothie with kale, apple and chlorophyll. “It’s L.A.,” he shrugged.

His 12 days in prison, he said, were worst before the fact. The reality of minimum-security confinement came as a relief.

“You’re expecting you’re going in to get raped and killed,” he said. “I get inside the prison, and the guards are basically mocking my sentence: ‘You’re more trouble for us than we are for you.’”

He told me that he and his wife, Simona, had found a rental apartment near the Hollywood sign, and he confirmed a Washington Post [report](#) that he was running for Congress. “I have some support,” he said. “There’s a lot of interest, actually, in it.” He had his eye on the 48th Congressional District, where a Democrat had just defeated Republican Dana Rohrabacher (“Ro, Roka, what’s his name — Dana Rakaburger?”).

In person, he came across as warm, oddly guileless and eager to please. He made boastful claims. (“I was on a first-name basis with Netanyahu for four years.”) He made ingratiating claims. (“As an individual I’m more comfortable with Washington Post people like you than with, I dunno, the Daily Caller.”) And then there was his central claim: that the entire federal investigation of Trump had its origins in dirty tricks masterminded by a group of foreign and U.S. intelligence entities.

If you’re among the Americans

who aren't obsessed with special counsel Robert S. Mueller III or dependent on MSNBC or Fox News — that is to say, the majority — you might need to be reminded that [George Papadopoulos](#) is the onetime foreign policy adviser to Trump who pleaded guilty in October 2017 to having lied to the FBI about the timing and extent of his contact with a professor who promised to connect him to high Russian officials. This made him an object of cable-news fascination, a man posited by many to be the long-sought link between the Trump campaign and Moscow, the key to unlocking a Kremlin-Trump conspiracy.

Although most people stopped believing anything so grandiose about him long before Mueller released the [report](#) of his collusion investigation, Papadopoulos, now 31, has

managed to (sort of) stay prominent. He has released a book, “[Deep State Target](#),” that lays out an alternate version of events, in which he was set up in a series of traps laid by the FBI, the CIA and foreign intelligence operatives. It has received enthusiastic endorsements on Fox News, where Papadopoulos has become a regular guest, and other right-leaning outlets.

In early October 2018, I began to correspond with Papadopoulos about writing a profile of him and his wife, with a view to understanding his version of events. If even half his claims checked out, they would upend everything we know about what has been called Russiagate. In late November, just before he was due to report to prison, we agreed to meet in Los Angeles after his release. So began my attempt to understand his story

— a project that would draw me into correspondence with Israeli officials, Swiss lawyers, Italian politicians, medical cannabis advocates, Hollywood filmmakers and comedian Tom Arnold. It was a movie with a deranged screenwriter and absurd characters — what, in America in 2019, you might call the usual. But that was all the more reason to try to make sense of it.



George Papadopoulos spent 12 days in

prison after pleading guilty in 2017 to having lied to the FBI.

**F**irst, let us lay out the basics. George Papadopoulos grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, the son of a Greek American couple who divorced when he was 7. George and his younger brother, Dean, lived with their father, Antonios, until George was a sophomore in high school, and then the boys moved to Lincolnwood to live with their mother, Kiki. George graduated from DePaul University in 2009. In 2011, armed with a master's in security studies from University College London, he became a researcher at the Hudson Institute, a Washington-based neoconservative think tank, working with senior fellow Seth Cropsey, chiefly on a project to encourage an energy alliance among Greece, Cyprus and Israel, and a pipeline project



that would exclude Turkey.

In 2015, soon after Trump descended the escalator at Trump Tower, Papadopoulos, eager to get into political life, tried to join the Trump campaign, with no success. Instead, a few months later, he landed a job as an adviser to presidential candidate Ben Carson. That lasted about two months, and in February 2016, Papadopoulos took a job at an organization called the London Center of International Law Practice, or LCILP. In early March 2016, after further outreach to the Trump campaign, he landed a role as an unpaid foreign policy adviser. Since one Trump campaign theme was to improve relations with Moscow, Papadopoulos spent several weeks trying to put together a meeting between Trump and Vladimir Putin.

Papadopoulos had no contacts with Russia, so he connected with someone who he believed did: a Maltese academic named Joseph Mifsud, who was a director at LCILP. On March 24, 2016, Papadopoulos wrote an email to Trump campaign co-chair Sam Clovis and the foreign policy team, saying that his “good friend” Mifsud had introduced him to a woman who was Putin’s niece (she wasn’t) and to the Russian ambassador in London (he hadn’t) and that the Russians were “keen to host us.” In an email, Clovis counseled holding off on taking action before NATO allies were consulted but added, “Great work.”

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For the next several weeks, Papadopoulos was in regular contact with Mifsud. He also exchanged emails

with a woman named Olga Polonskaya, a.k.a. “Putin’s niece,” and with Ivan Timofeev of the Russian International Affairs Council, a prominent Moscow think tank. On May 10, Papadopoulos had drinks with Alexander Downer, Australia’s high commissioner to the United Kingdom at the time, and mentioned that Moscow might reveal damaging information it had about Hillary Clinton. This was relayed to Canberra and later to the U.S. Embassy in London. Upon this basis, it has been reported, the FBI launched a counterintelligence investigation of the Trump campaign, code-named Crossfire Hurricane. In September, FBI informant Stefan Halper met Papadopoulos under the pretext of commissioning a report on oil fields in the Mediterranean, for which he ultimately paid Papadopoulos \$3,000.

In late January 2017, soon after Trump's inauguration, Papadopoulos was questioned by FBI agents about his contacts with Russians and other foreign nationals. In February, Papadopoulos deleted his Facebook account. Then, on July 27, 2017, after returning from an extended trip abroad, Papadopoulos was arrested at Dulles Airport and charged with lying to the FBI about the timing and significance of his relationship with Mifsud and with obstructing justice for having deleted his Facebook account, the latter offense carrying a potential 20-year sentence. He pleaded guilty to the lesser charge of lying.

These are the core, agreed-upon facts. When the news of Papadopoulos's guilty plea broke on Oct. 30, 2017, the most common theory of the case, based on news reports at the time, was that

Papadopoulos, a little-known Trump campaign adviser, had been coordinating with a Kremlin asset, Mifsud. With time, that softened into a theory that a foolish young man had been courted by a shadowy Kremlin operative and then lied about it. But there is also a Papadopoulos version of the story. In that account, Papadopoulos is approached by spies tied to the U.S., British, Israeli and Australian governments for the purpose (depending upon the spy) of either foiling his anti-Turkey recommendations or sabotaging Donald Trump's campaign. His meetings with Mifsud and Downer were part of a larger setup.

“This was not a Russian operation. This was a British-Australian operation,” he says. “The Israelis helped.” Papadopoulos, in short, is offering a conspiracy theory.

This in itself doesn't make him wrong. Sometimes, after all, the existence of a conspiracy is certain, and solving the mysteries surrounding it must involve theory. Sometimes, the existence of a conspiracy is uncertain but still worth investigating. What, after all, was the idea that Trump and Putin had coordinated with WikiLeaks to steal the 2016 election if not a theory of conspiracy? In the case of Papadopoulos, it seemed certain that conspirators of some sort had entangled him in their web. On that much, both liberals and conservatives could agree.



Simona Mangiante Papadopoulos, an Italian lawyer who married George in March 2018, often fights with Russiagate obsessives on Twitter.

**S** imona Mangiante Papadopoulos is a stylish Italian lawyer who a multitude of Americans, at least those with prolonged MSNBC exposure, seem to believe is a Russian spy. Simona and George moved from Chicago to Southern California in September 2018, when Simona landed a small movie

role. Within a few weeks, their life became almost as surreal as George's had been in 2016. They befriended comedian and actor Tom Arnold, ex-husband of Roseanne Barr, even though he is so hostile to Trump that he once got a visit from the Secret Service for a tweet offering to fight with the president. They also signed up for a multi-episode documentary about their lives, meaning that a production crew was frequently tailing them. For me, this created a friendly game of cat and mouse, since I wanted to chronicle the crew filming, while the crew preferred to film me chronicling. (We wound up staying mostly separate.)

Simona, meanwhile, was leading a [Twitter life](#) punctuated by fights with Russiagate obsessives, random trolls and sometimes her own mother-in-law. She has a terrible relationship with



George's family, and when I first interviewed her and George together, I deemed the subject touchy enough that I decided to postpone mention of it to a subsequent trip. She brought it up in 20 minutes. "I left everything behind and gave unconditional support to my husband," she said. "The least I expect is a neutral attitude."

The three of us met for dinner at Simona's favorite Italian place, Via Alloro, in Beverly Hills. Simona, who has striking green eyes and blond (though naturally brownish) hair, wore a white knit dress with a black belt and thigh-high tan suede boots. Her lipstick was crimson. Her speech, already accented, can get so rapid when she's worked up that the documentary crew has discussed using subtitles.

Simona was born in 1981 and grew up in Caserta, Italy, near

Naples. She earned a law degree in 2005 and spent several years in a variety of internships and legal jobs before taking a post with the European Parliament, where she worked for seven years. In the fall of 2016, she moved to London and found a job at LCILP, working with Joseph Mifsud. This is how George came into her life.

Although he had left LCILP half a year earlier, he had noticed Simona's picture on the website and sent her a flirtatious message. They stayed in touch.

After three months, Simona left LCILP and hung up her own shingle, specializing in law related to international child abduction. In April 2017, when she took a trip to New York to visit her aunt, George showed up at the airport, and this first meeting led to a passionate attraction. They met several times more over the following months, vacationing on

Mykonos and Capri and visiting Simona's parents in Caserta. She was still living in London when George went dark one day and stopped responding to messages or calls. Only a few days later, when he sent Simona a message from his mother's Facebook account, did she find out that he had been arrested.

Simona flew to Chicago, where George was living with his mother. It was 15 days after George's arrest, and she saw a frightened man. They spent three weeks together. On a subsequent trip to Chicago, she received a subpoena from Robert Mueller and underwent a multi-hour FBI interrogation. During the year that followed, she kept coming back, and her savings ran out. "I realized I really cared about him," she said.

On Simona's third trip to Chicago, in December 2017,

George proposed marriage, getting down on one knee in his room in his mother's house. On March 2, 2018, they were married at City Hall. No one from George's family attended. The only guests were then-ABC News journalists Rhonda Schwartz and Brian Ross, who later did a segment on the wedding. In smoother times a few months earlier, George's mother had given Simona a family ring, a large emerald surrounded by diamonds. Simona held up her hand to show it to me. Remembering this gift, she seemed to soften toward her in-law. "This situation makes everybody crazy," she said.

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ecause Simona and George live in an unusual sort of isolation, with many invitations to Hollywood events as novelty guests but with few close friends, they have developed an unlikely circle of intimates.

Among them is the documentary team. FGW Productions, headed by producer Stephanie Frederic, recently did a six-part A&E documentary on the murder of Tupac Shakur, but Frederic has observed that Simona and George, who are prone to

intense changes of mind and mood, make that one seem easy.

Simona and George are technically unpaid for participation, but FGW compensates them for other things, like family photographs and incidentals. The first extended period the group spent together was during the days immediately before George's departure for prison in Oxford, Wis. For Simona, who was in tears for much of her time in Wisconsin, the film crew was a comfort in the storm, and after George's release, the couple grew closer and closer to Frederic, even staying at her apartment for several weeks. "I find myself being part therapist, part producer," says Frederic. This may understate her role. For a while, she was advising them on media inquiries, too, and the documentary team even helped find George and Simona their apartment in Beachwood

Canyon. This raises obvious questions about the effect of observer on the observed, but Frederic said she never looks to create situations for their own sake in the manner of reality TV.

If Frederic has become an improbable surrogate mother, Tom Arnold has become an improbable surrogate father. We met at one of his haunts, Soho House West Hollywood. Arnold was sipping honey tea to battle a bout of laryngitis, but he relished talking about Simona and George, frequently dissolving into high-pitched chuckles.

The three had met on Beverly Drive, he said, when Arnold was out walking with his kids. George had called out “Tom Arnold!” and introduced himself. An exchange of numbers led to an invitation from Arnold to meet him at

Soho House. George showed up first. “He started telling his story, and I started taking some notes,” said Arnold. “Then she comes out, and the world lights up.” The three have been friends ever since. As Arnold sees it, George is a good kid who got in over his head. Fringe rightists, he believes, have seduced him into a narrative that elevates his importance even as it absolves him of guilt. “They want George to be their conspiracy monkey,” he said.

If the friendship with Arnold was improbable, it may also have been inevitable. Arnold seems to have crossed paths with everyone, including, to his displeasure, Trump. Arnold sees George and Simona as incompetent spies in an unlikely love story, and he has since become an informal therapist to the couple. “I said to them, ‘I was in a famous marriage,’” he said, referring to his long-ago



union with Barr. “I’m also a writer and a storyteller. People will tell bits and pieces of your story. But you’re the ones who get to tell your whole story.”



**A**s the weeks went by, I contacted many former Papadopoulos acquaintances in government, think tanks and the private sector in the United States, Israel, Cyprus, Egypt and Greece. Those who spoke to me

offered similar impressions: Papadopoulos was an agreeable young man who'd often worked alongside Hudson Institute fellow Seth Cropsey. But most offered no response. Cropsey ignored multiple emails and eventually passed me on to the Hudson Institute press office, which offered careful and uninteresting replies. (I contacted nearly everyone mentioned in this article, but many declined to answer or to comment on the record.)

I next saw George and Simona in late January, a day after Simona's birthday, when the couple were to be photographed for this article. The shoot was at their apartment, a small 1920s duplex on a leafy thoroughfare north of Franklin Boulevard. When I arrived, Simona was sitting on a stool getting makeup applied, while George, dressed in a dark cotton sweater and jeans, brewed espresso in a

red Bialetti pot on a burner in the kitchen.

The downstairs of their home consisted of one 12-by-18-foot main room, an adjacent kitchen and a walled patio. Squeezed into these spaces were a dozen of us: George and Simona, the makeup artist, a photographer and two assistants, three members of the documentary crew, a decorator, myself and Travis Barker, the decorator's Yorkshire terrier.

If the hosts felt bothered by such an intrusion, they didn't show it. They were happy that their apartment had been made habitable at all. The decorator, whom FGW had hired for the occasion, had stretched a budget of \$3,000 and filled up the place. The living room now had a blue-and-white Persian-themed area rug, a blue couch, a round faux-marble-top coffee table, a tea-light candelabrum,

an unframed modern painting on the wall, and fake flowers and assorted knickknacks on the fireplace mantel and the built-in shelves.

There was a knock on the front door. “I brought your suits,” said Tom Arnold, walking in with clothes on a hanger.

George and Simona, grinning and surprised, hurried over to him. The documentary crew hurried over, too. “Happy birthday, happy birthday,” he told Simona. “Is your mother-in-law — I saw them removing a dumpster — is she in pieces in there?”

After the shoot, the couple got ready for a party at the Italian Cultural Institute in Westwood. I gave them a ride there, and since they were famished, we swung by In-N-Out Burger. As we waited in the drive-through line, George said he was no longer running for Congress but

focusing instead on his role on the advisory board of C3® International, a medical cannabis start-up that he hoped would help stem the opioid crisis. Simona said she was proud of her husband for his career and for his onward march. “Thank you, my love,” he said. “We were resilient, Simona. Many people would not be resilient. They would just give up.”

**Tom Arnold  
relished talking  
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**C**onspiratorial stories can be reasonable or insane, but most have the same trigger: a glitch in the narrative, something in the official explanation that doesn't make sense. In the case of George Papadopoulos, that glitch is Joseph Mifsud.

The New York Times has called Mifsud “an enthusiastic promoter of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.” Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee have labeled him a “Kremlin-linked” “cutout.” Documents later produced by Mueller and his team suggested that, if not for Papadopoulos's lies, investigators might have elected to “challenge the Professor or potentially detain or arrest him while he was still in the United States.”

But Mifsud worked in high

government circles in Europe, and no action taken by investigators suggests that they viewed him as a serious threat. Until the Papadopoulos indictment went public, Mifsud appears to have lived a normal and unencumbered life, attending conferences and meeting with Western government officials. Stephan Roh, a Zurich-based lawyer who communicates with the media on Mifsud's behalf, maintains that Mifsud "is not a Russian spy but a Western intelligence co-operator."

Mifsud went into hiding days after Papadopoulos's plea became public, and his disappearance leaves rabbit holes that threaten to swallow even the most cautious explorer. But we can say this much: If he was Kremlin-linked, then he managed to infiltrate a lot of European and possibly American institutions, and it's

strange that there hasn't been an outcry or investigations into the breach. On the other hand, if he was part of Western intelligence, then, as Republican congressman Jim Jordan told Fox News, "that changes it all."

**G**eorge and Simona depend more than most people on the help of new friends. Simona's outreach can resemble that of a panicked swimmer. George relies more on warmth, flattery and a Zelig-like adaptability to his audience. When the organizer of the Hollywood Beauty Awards, to which he'd been invited, called him as we walked to a cafe, it sounded at times as if he were speaking to Florence Nightingale. "It's a great cause," he said. "It's people like you who are changing the world one step at a time."



For all his low-level fawning, Papadopoulos never asked me for favors and only rarely went off the record. Sometimes, I would remind him that I was recording. Once or twice, out of compassion, I felt compelled to offer him a chance to walk back a jejune statement. He never did.

His most reflective moment came during an interview in a dreary bakery area at Gelson's, an upscale supermarket chain. He admitted that participating in a documentary, which would expose many embarrassing things, was risky. "Sometimes I don't understand why I'm doing it," he said. He talked about growing up in suburban Chicago, experiencing his parents' divorce and being separated from his mother. He's estranged from his brother, and relations with his mother seem to be loving but rocky. He'd told me earlier that he hadn't seen

his father in nearly two years. “I think of the situation as part of the collateral damage,” he said. “I don’t justify his behavior at all. I would never abandon my son, basically, in the middle of a crisis, like he has.”

Why, I asked, had he been so hungry for early success? He grew thoughtful. “I looked up to my father,” he said. “I loved that he was a doctor and very successful. I always said to myself, ‘When I have children someday, hopefully, I want them to revere me that way too.’”

“I guess a bit of it was having a chip on my shoulder, not following the medical path, and viewing politics as the most prestigious role you could possibly have in the world,” he mused. “I mean, at 25, I could sit in a meeting one-on-one like I am with you with a foreign minister of a foreign country. ...

And for me there was something exhilarating in it. It made my blood rush. It was a thrill. I would just tell my dad: You're rich. I love that. You have a beautiful home. But what's your thrill?"



Comedian and actor Tom Arnold has become an informal therapist to the Papadopouloses.

**A**s anyone who has spent any time in the Twitterverse knows, it's a warped space that can feel like a gauge of public sentiment even as it distorts it. In the case of Simona, a faction of Twitter seems to believe that she is on a long-term Kremlin mission connected to Joseph Mifsud. This notion went into overdrive when she was caught in an acknowledged deception: sending ABC News a photo of her passport that altered her birth date by three years. (She says she wanted to pass as younger in Hollywood.) British blogger and former member of Parliament Louise Mensch, who is notorious for seeing a Russian hand in everything from Islamic State terrorism in Istanbul to the 2012 death of Andrew Breitbart, is one of her most ardent attackers.

Hoping that my reporting would

help beat back this tide, Simona provided me with contacts for family, friends and former colleagues. I spoke to her mother, Carolina Cicutelli, who sent me a dozen photographs showing Simona at various ages in settings that were obviously Italian. Italian socialist Gianni Pittella, a former vice president of the European Parliament, said he'd known Simona's family for years and described her as "loyal and a very, very good person." (Pittella, as it happens, is also a friend of Joseph Mifsud's and introduced Simona to him.) Old friends told me stories that matched up, and no one disputed that she'd worked for the European Parliament for seven years. I did see from her Internet pursuers that she had changed her LinkedIn profile in small ways and tweeted out and deleted documents related to her employment; still, to jump to espionage (as opposed to

unemployment or breakups or moves) as the explanation made about as much sense as jumping to tuberculosis as the reason for a cough.

George, by contrast, was proving more troublesome. He had been quick to pull up articles he'd written with Cropsey (claiming to have done most or all of the writing) and a photo of himself and Cropsey in a meeting with the president of Cyprus, to prove that he had played a crucial role at the Hudson Institute. But I was still waiting to see emails backing up other claims about his career there.

I spoke to George's mother, Kiki Papadopoulos. She painted a vivid picture of the toll taken by an FBI investigation. But she also told me that her ex-husband, rather than abandoning his son as George had claimed, had been

supportive during George's ordeal and had paid his legal bills.

**I** next saw the Papadopouloses on the evening before Valentine's Day, and George was especially upbeat. Days earlier, Republican congressman Mark Meadows had called for declassifying the files on Russiagate. "Let's start with the docs on George Papadopoulos," Meadows tweeted, adding that "I know, and the FBI knows, that Papadopoulos was not part of any collusion."

George and Simona had asked to dine at Crustacean, an haute-Vietnamese fusion restaurant in Beverly Hills. "What do you think," George asked the waiter, "the crab or the lobster?"

“The crab is what we’re world-famous for,” the waiter said.

I remembered, with expense-account dread, that the crab cost \$72.

“Let’s do two of those crabs,” said George.

I asked him about a tweet he’d sent the day before: “Trust the plan.” I’d been astonished to see him trot out a signature phrase among adherents of a conspiracy theory called QAnon, centered on an anonymous Web poster called “Q” who claims to be a government official working with Trump on a master plan to expose a corrupt deep state.

Papadopoulos said the tweet had been inspired by a Drake song, “God’s Plan,” and had nothing to do with conspiracy. “All of a sudden, I have 10,000 likes,” he said, breaking into



laughter. “And all these people are like, ‘You’re making me cry. You have no idea how emotional I am that you’re Q.’”

On the drive home, as we discussed how many of Papadopoulos’s former contacts had minimized their ties to him, I reminded him of how important old emails would be to bolster his version of events. “I have them, all of them,” he said. Simona, sitting in back, hadn’t made a sound, and I turned around to see if she’d fallen asleep. No, she’d been fighting on Twitter with Louise Mensch.

The next morning, Los Angeles was deluged in rain. I arrived at the Papadopoulos apartment to drive us to a production meeting with FGW. Simona, wearing a white blazer, jeans and her above-the-knee suede boots, seemed out of sorts, and as she prepared the Bialetti pot

for coffee, she told me she'd slept poorly. The Twitter battle with Mensch had expanded into a marital battle. George had retweeted Mensch when she plugged his book, but he had stayed quiet when Mensch hurled Russian-spy allegations at Simona.

“I'm very disappointed by him, actually, more than Louise,” Simona said. “She's playing a game, right? She's telling George, ‘I'm interested in your book. Your wife is a Russian agent.’ It would be simple and elegant to say, ‘Thanks for being interested in my book, but read the record about my wife's background.’”

As Simona continued in this vein, George walked in, his face pinkish from a shower and puffy from recent sleep. “And my logic is very simple,” he said. “Me shouting to the world that my wife is not a Russian spy

puts much more attention on her, mocks her, and it mocks —”

“No, no George, this is an easy way to dismiss —”

They began to talk over each other. “You have to be a man,” said Simona. “Grow some man qualities, and face people who insult me and bully me. You can’t do that? This is the door, you can go.”

I looked at the clock and suggested we skip coffee. We headed into the rain, and George and Simona, still fighting, shared a children’s umbrella with cat ears. Traffic was slow in the downpour, and there was going to be no change of subject. I asked if social media was a frequent source of their disputes.

“This is very typical from her,” said George, unhelpfully.

“From her, because of your behavior,” said Simona.

“I don’t need to go to every single person on Twitter and say don’t say that about my wife. You’re talking like a 5-year-old.”

“George, you’re talking like a little traitor with no balls. That’s what you’re talking about. That’s what you are, actually.”

By the time I pulled up to Simona’s destination, the two had agreed to divorce.

“It’s really sad, actually. I feel really disgusted by you,” Simona said, opening the door and planting a suede boot in a large puddle.



I liked George and Simona. I could see why Tom Arnold had told me that they were meant for each other. They seemed to fight and make up daily. A few hours after their morning clash, when George noticed a bleeding hangnail, Simona reacted as if he'd been wounded by a sword. For all their troubles, they took pleasure in life and savored new experiences. My theory of Simona was that she was an intelligent but temperamental

person who was in love with George. But my theory of George was more unsettled.

During our first meeting, he had told me he'd had \$35,000 in the bank when he was arrested. At a subsequent meeting, he said it was \$25,000. He had claimed not to have seen his father for almost two years, but his sentencing statement noted his parents being in the courtroom. When I mentioned learning that his father had paid his legal bills, he said that his father had helped him only after making him exhaust his savings.

When I spoke on the phone to George's father, Antonios Papadopoulos, he called George's claim of having to drain his savings a "100 percent lie." "George had no savings that I'm aware of," Antonios said. "I paid for everything, including his transportation back and forth to the court and

the \$9,500 fine.” As for the family’s relations with Simona, he would say only that “I see Simona’s involvement in George’s life entirely differently from the way George sees it.”

A few days later, I spoke to C3® International CEO Steele Smith. Papadopoulos had said he was being paid \$100,000 a year to sit on the company’s advisory board. But Smith characterized Papadopoulos as a “minor shareholder” and said the position was unpaid. (Papadopoulos later forwarded me a proposal from the company that laid out the payment terms as he had described them. Smith said the proposal was not current.)

I spoke to a British barrister named Arvinder Sambei, who had worked with LCILP until early 2017. Papadopoulos had identified her as a lawyer for the FBI who had arranged for him

to meet Joseph Mifsud in Italy. “I’m completely taken aback,” she said, adding that she had encountered Papadopoulos only once, when she was making tea, and that she had never been engaged as counsel by the FBI. Rather, as a former senior prosecutor for the Crown Prosecution Service, she had sometimes worked with the FBI’s Office of International Affairs.

By the time I reached a U.S.-Israeli businessman whom Papadopoulos now accuses of being part of a sting operation against him overseen by the FBI — supposedly in a failed effort to make Papadopoulos look like a spy for Israel and give them a reason to arrest him — I doubted I would be speaking to a secret agent. His name is Charles Tawil, and he forwarded me numerous emails and messages contradicting Papadopoulos’s timeline and



claims. Papadopoulos has alleged that Tawil gave him \$10,000 in marked bills (which he now says Congress wants to examine) and that he took it out of fear. But Tawil says that Papadopoulos himself requested the money. It was an advance on a consulting deal that had fallen through because of an inappropriate email Papadopoulos had later sent the client.

Tawil forwarded me that email, from mid-June 2017, as well as messages sent several weeks later, in which Papadopoulos wrote that he had been offered a job in Brussels but turned it down. “Of course I prefer working with you than to some job in the eu commission, but need to know that we are still working together you and I on the deals and with retainer monthly,” he wrote. Tawil, who is bitter that Papadopoulos never returned the money and

accused Tawil of being a secret agent, told me he now assumes that Papadopoulos was lying about everything.

I had pressed Papadopoulos on providing corroborating documents, saying this was key to his credibility. He said he was locked out of his old email accounts but finally texted me that his ghostwriter on “Deep State Target” had a paper archive of his emails that I could pick up in New York. I got the writer to send them, and five days later I received a binder that included hundreds of emails — with only occasional redactions — between Papadopoulos and the Trump-related people in his life during 2016 and 2017. Papadopoulos had been evasive about providing written evidence, but this was a remarkable gesture of transparency, and he placed no

conditions on my use of the collection.

I was struck to see a number of Papadopoulos's statements verified. Yes, he had helped engineer a meeting, through an Egyptian embassy official, between Trump and Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sissi. Yes, he had offered input on Trump's foreign policy speech in late April 2016. Yes, there was an email from Theresa May's office asking Papadopoulos to pass on official congratulations to Trump.

At the same time, however, the collection undermined many claims that he has made. Some examples: "Deep State Target" describes a cryptic conversation with a Belarusian American businessman named Sergei Millian in January 2017 that Papadopoulos characterizes as "the last I hear from him. Ever." But in reality Millian kept

emailing Papadopoulos, getting no reply, for months afterward. The book claims that Trump headquarters informed him of an interview request from Russian news service Interfax and gave him instructions about what to say, complimenting him afterward. In reality, Interfax contacted Papadopoulos directly, and though the campaign okayed the interview, the feedback afterward apparently wasn't positive. Papadopoulos wrote to campaign official Michael Glassner to ask if he was, as others had told him, "off the campaign because of an interview I gave."

Papadopoulos seems to have met a number of foreign officials by suggesting that he had a close connection to Trump. Then he would write to the campaign about these meetings and suggest he had a close connection to foreign

officials. (This included the untrue claim to have met the Russian ambassador to London.) At no point — apart from Clovis’s “Great work” — does anyone in the campaign seem to encourage his outreach to Moscow.

I had been through many potential narratives of Papadopoulos, but now a simple one was starting to emerge: that an ambitious young man with a strong desire to impress people had most likely embellished his way into a world of trouble, relaying common rumors (e.g., that the Russians had damaging information about Hillary Clinton) as firsthand information to people like Alexander Downer. If this theory was true, then Papadopoulos’s story wasn’t about how a vital campaign operative fell into traps laid by deep-state conspirators. It was about how, in a time of Trump-

Russia hysteria, a minor player could set off global earthquakes because he wanted to look big.



An uncomfortable list of inconsistencies had to be discussed, and I flew down to Los Angeles in March to ask Papadopoulos about them in person. “Deep State Target” had been released a few days earlier, and George, sometimes accompanied by Simona, had been appearing on

cable news nonstop. When I stepped into the apartment in Beachwood Canyon, I could see that the two of them were exhausted.

I caught up first with Simona, who had made a voluntary closed-door appearance before Senate investigators. Among the questions she'd been asked was why George said he'd never met with a Russian yet had boasted in emails that he'd met several Russians, including the ambassador to Britain. "You know what I said: Knowing George he was bulls---ing," Simona said with a laugh. "He was just trying to impress somebody." After about an hour, she went upstairs to take a nap, and George and I seated ourselves on the tiny Spanish-tiled patio to go over remaining questions.

Since Papadopoulos had implied to an interviewer that

he'd broken off relations with Charles Tawil in June 2017, why, I asked, had he messaged Tawil weeks later, to say he had turned down a job in Brussels to keep working with him? "That was me trying to get him away from me," Papadopoulos answered. "Me telling him I have a new job is polite for 'Leave me alone.' "

But didn't he tell Tawil he'd turned down the job? "Well, because I had his money in my pocket. I'm trying to say, 'Hey, man, I still have your money. I'm trying to get away from you, but you know I have a liability here in my hand.' "

Why had he told Congress that the FBI had said when arresting him, "This is what happens when you don't tell us everything about your Russia contacts," but had written in his book that an FBI agent had told him, "This is what happens



when you work for Trump”?

“There was an agent who made that remark, okay? This is in the middle of seven agents swarming me, and a chaotic moment. But because I can’t remember who exactly said that comment, that’s why I wasn’t telling Congress that.”

We spent an hour in this manner. But the ordeal seemed to bother me more than Papadopoulos. As the three of us drove to dinner afterward, the conversation was cheerful as ever. This time, I’d chosen the restaurant: Yamashiro, a Japanese-themed place with an expansive view of the city.

“Wow, look how beautiful this is,” George said as we pulled up.

“This is one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever seen. This is amazing.”

**Simona and  
George seemed  
to fight and  
make up daily.  
But for all their  
troubles, they  
took pleasure in  
life and savored  
new  
experiences.**

**R**obert Mueller's  
"Report on the  
Investigation Into  
Russian Interference in the  
2016 Presidential Election" was  
released in April. It raised  
questions about obstruction of  
justice but closed the door on  
theories of conspiracy between  
the Trump campaign and  
Russia. Overall, it has been a  
helpful development for

Papadopoulos. The report has confirmed his claim that he was investigated for his ties to Israel. A subsequent story in the New York Times bore out his claim that Azra Turk, a young woman who allegedly posed as a flirtatious assistant to FBI informant Stefan Halper, was yet another spy (or, in Times parlance, “cloaked investigator”) sent by the U.S. government. Such revelations, coming in the wake of other news reports calling into question the propriety of FBI behavior toward the Trump campaign, have led a growing number of people to buy into Papadopoulos’s story as a whole. On May 3, even Donald Trump weighed in, tweeting out Papadopoulos’s claim to Sean Hannity that “this whole thing was a complete setup.” But I also saw on social media that close observers of his case, often on the right, were raising questions about contradictions

in his stories.

During my final dinner with George and Simona, we talked about Los Angeles and winter rains and Italian intelligence agencies. Afterward, we walked out to a garden overlooking nighttime Los Angeles, glittering to the sea. I took a few pictures, including one of a happy Simona planting a kiss on George's cheek. "This was so fun," George said. I was reminded of what Stephanie Frederic had told one of the people she recruited for her Papadopoulos documentary: "You're going to like them."

When I dropped them off at home, we exchanged hugs. George told me that I'd become a friend and that having me reporting on them had been a special experience. "Yes," Simona said. "You taught us — many things."

But I could say that they had taught me things, too, or at least made them clear. The more a given narrative means to us, the harder it is to abandon, even if the facts don't support it. That's true of those on the left who continue to see Trump-Russia collusion — and it's true of those on the right who, despite the inconsistencies in Papadopoulos's story, have begun to champion it.

Perhaps more than anything, what unites the combatants in America's cold civil war is a need for heroes and villains who can keep us entertained.

Whatever you think of George and Simona, they are great characters, and you can cast them as good guys or bad guys with equal ease, depending on your agenda. Maybe that's why they've had such a fruitful transition from the world of politics to the world of Hollywood — if you can call that

a transition at all.

*T.A. Frank is a writer at large  
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