The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus's Wife

A hotly contested, supposedly ancient manuscript suggests Christ was married. But believing its origin story—a real-life *Da Vinci Code*, involving a Harvard professor, a onetime Florida pornographer, and an escape from East Germany—requires a big leap of faith.

ARIEL SABAR / JULY/AUGUST 2016 ISSUE

ON A HUMID AFTERNOON this past November, I pulled off Interstate 75 into a stretch of Florida pine forest tangled with runaway vines. My GPS was homing in on the house of a man I thought might hold the master key to one of the strangest scholarly mysteries in recent decades: a 1,300-year-old scrap of papyrus that bore the phrase "Jesus said to them, My wife." The fragment, written in the ancient language of Coptic, had set off shock waves when an eminent Harvard historian of early Christianity, Karen L. King, presented it in September 2012 at a conference in Rome.

Never before had an ancient manuscript alluded to Jesus's being married. The papyrus's lines were incomplete, but they seemed to describe a dialogue between Jesus and the apostles over whether his "wife"—possibly Mary Magdalene—was "worthy" of discipleship. Its main point, King argued, was that "women who are wives and mothers can be Jesus's disciples." She thought the passage likely figured into ancient debates over whether "marriage or celibacy [was] the ideal mode of Christian life" and, ultimately, whether a person could be both sexual and holy.

King called the business-card-size papyrus "The Gospel of Jesus's Wife." But even without that provocative title, it would have shaken the world of biblical scholarship. Centuries of Christian tradition are bound up in whether the scrap is authentic or, as a growing group of scholars contends, an outrageous modern fake: Jesus's bachelorhood helps form the basis for priestly celibacy, and his all-male cast of apostles has long been cited to justify limits on women's religious leadership. In the Roman Catholic Church in particular, the New Testament is seen as divine revelation handed down through a long line of men—Jesus, the 12 apostles, the Church fathers, the popes, and finally the priests who bring God's word to the parish pews today.

King showed the papyrus to a small group of media outlets in the weeks before her announcement—*The Boston Globe, The New York Times*, and both *Smithsonian* magazine and the Smithsonian Channel—on the condition that no stories run before her presentation in Rome. *Smithsonian* assigned me a long feature, sending me to see King at

Harvard and then to follow her to Rome. I was the only reporter in the room when she revealed her find to colleagues, who reacted with equal parts fascination and disbelief.

"The Gospel of Jesus's Wife" papyrus (Karen L. King / Harvard / AP)

Within days, doubts mounted. The Vatican newspaper labeled the papyrus "an inept forgery." Scholars took to their blogs to point out apparent errors in Coptic grammar as well as phrases that seemed to have been lifted from the Gospel of Thomas. Others deemed the text suspiciously in step with the zeitgeist of growing religious egalitarianism and of intrigue around the idea, popularized by *The Da Vinci Code*, of a married Jesus. The controversy made news around the world, including an article in these pages.

A year and a half later, however, Harvard announced the results of carbon-dating tests, multispectral imaging, and other lab analyses: The papyrus appeared to be of ancient origin, and the ink had no obviously modern ingredients. This didn't rule out fraud. A determined forger could obtain a blank scrap of centuries-old papyrus (perhaps even on eBay, where old papyri are routinely auctioned), mix ink from ancient recipes, and fashion passable Coptic script, particularly if he or she had some scholarly training. But the scientific findings complicated the case for forgery. The Gospel of Jesus's Wife had undergone—and passed—more state-of-the-art lab tests, inch for inch, than almost any other papyrus in history.

But skeptics had identified other problems. Among the most damning was an odd typographical error that appears in both the Jesus's-wife fragment and an edition of the Gospel of Thomas that was posted online in 2002, suggesting an easily available source for a modern forger's cut-and-paste job.

With King and her critics at loggerheads, each insisting on the primacy of their evidence, I wondered why no one had conducted a different sort of test: a thorough vetting of the papyrus's chain of ownership.

King has steadfastly honored the current owner's request for anonymity. But in 2012, she sent me the text of e-mails she'd exchanged with him, after removing his name and identifying details. His account of how he'd come to possess the fragment, I noticed, contained a series of small inconsistencies. At the time, I wasn't sure what to make of them. But years later, they still gnawed at me.

The American Association of Museums' *Guide to Provenance Research* warns that an investigation of an object's origins "is not unlike detective work": "One may spend hours, days, or weeks following a trail that leads nowhere." When I started to dig, however, I uncovered more than I'd ever expected—a warren of secrets and lies that spanned from the industrial districts of Berlin to the swingers scene of southwest Florida, and from the halls of Harvard and the Vatican to the headquarters of the East German Stasi.

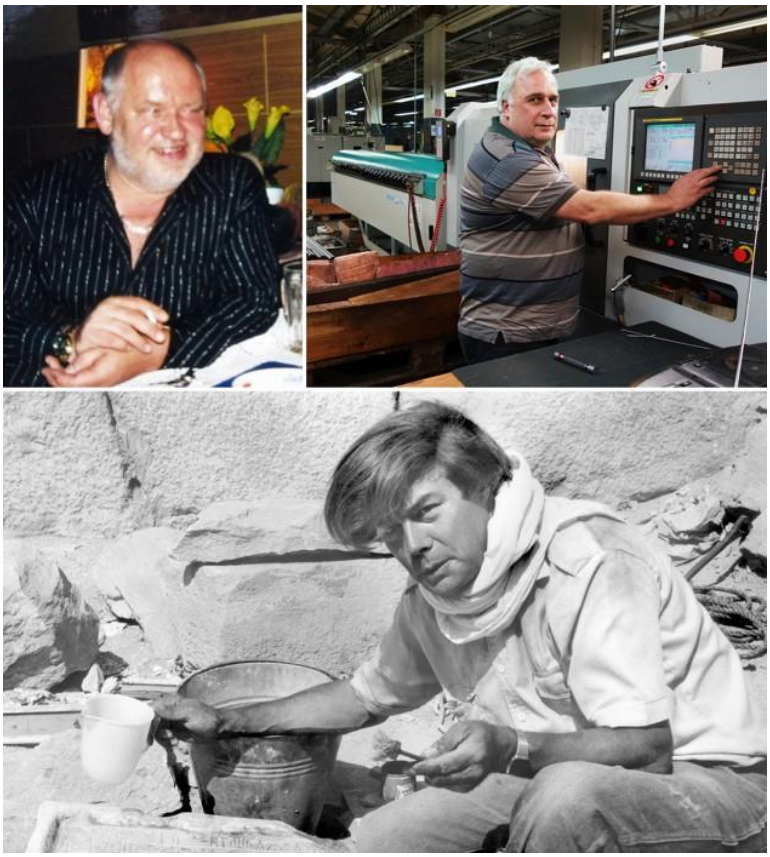
THE OWNER of the Jesus's-wife fragment, whoever he was, had told King a story about where, when, and how he'd acquired it. But the closest thing he had to corroboration was a photocopy of a signed sales contract. The contract recorded his purchase of six Coptic papyri, in November 1999, from a man named Hans-Ulrich Laukamp. The contract said that Laukamp had himself acquired the papyri in Potsdam, in Communist East Germany, in 1963.

The owner also gave King a scan of a photocopy—that is, a copy of a copy—of a 1982 letter to Laukamp from Peter Munro, an Egyptologist at Berlin's Free University. Munro wrote that a colleague had looked at the papyri and thought one of them bore text from the Gospel of John.

The only written reference to the Jesus's-wife papyrus appeared in yet another scan—of an unsigned, undated, handwritten note. It said that Munro's colleague believed that "the small fragment … is the sole example of a text in which Jesus uses direct speech with reference to having a wife," which "could be evidence for a possible marriage."

Perhaps conveniently, every player in this story was dead. Peter Munro died in 2009, the colleague he had supposedly consulted about the papyri died in 2006, and Hans-Ulrich Laukamp died in 2002. King thus declared the scrap's history all but unknowable. "The lack of information regarding the provenance of the discovery is unfortunate," she wrote in 2014, in an article about the papyrus in the *Harvard Theological Review*, "since, when known, such information is extremely pertinent."

But was there a lack of information? Or just a lack of investigation? The owner, for one, was still alive and had known Laukamp personally, King told me in 2012. In one e-mail to King, the owner wrote that Laukamp had "brought [his papyri] over when he immigrated to the USA." That suggested that Laukamp had sold them while living in America.



The owner of the papyrus claimed to have bought it from an auto-parts executive named Hans-Ulrich Laukamp (*top left*), who had gone into business with his friend Axel Herzsprung (*top right*). Laukamp had supposedly shown several papyri to an Egyptologist named Peter Munro (*bottom*) in 1982. (Clockwise: Walter Fritz; Ariel Sabar; Christian E. Loeben)

I searched public documents and found just one American city that had ever been home to a Hans-Ulrich Laukamp. In 1997, a German couple named Hans-Ulrich and Helga Laukamp had built a single-story stucco house with a swimming pool in the Gulf Coast city of Venice, Florida.

I tracked down people who had known the Laukamps, and they told me that the couple were chain smokers with almost no grasp of English; they were loners in a middle-income enclave of bike-riding "active seniors." Helga had worked in a laundry, and Hans-Ulrich was a toolmaker who had never finished high school—not the background I was expecting for a manuscript collector.

The Laukamps might never have left their small Berlin apartment were it not for a late-in-life reversal of fortune. In 1995, Laukamp and his friend Axel Herzsprung, a fellow toolmaker, went into business together. The company, ACMB Metallbearbeitung GmbH, or ACMB Metalworking, won a lucrative contract to make brake components for BMW and was soon drawing profits of about $250,000 a year.

Laukamp, then in his mid-50s, bought a Pontiac Firebird and nudged Herzsprung and his wife to build a vacation home next to his in Florida, where the Laukamps hoped to one day retire. But those dreams evaporated almost as soon as they landed in the Sunshine State. Helga was diagnosed with lung cancer, and Hans-Ulrich took her back to Germany, where she died in December 1999 at the age of 56. The company filed for bankruptcy in August 2002, and Hans-Ulrich died four months later, at 59, after lung cancer metastasized to his brain.

Looking over his company's public records, I spotted a peculiar detail. Four days after Laukamp's wife died in a Berlin hospital, his auto-parts company incorporated an American branch, using the address of an office building in Venice, Florida. What's more, Laukamp and Herzsprung weren't the American business's only officers. There was a third man, someone named Walter Fritz, who'd come to Florida from Germany at least four years before the other two and who would soon strike both men from the corporate documents, leaving him as the sole director of the American branch.

Walter Fritz still lived in Florida, and on paper he looked like an unremarkable local: 50 years old, married, with a single-story house in North Port, 30 minutes east of Venice. If Fritz stood out for anything, it was his civic ardor. He wrote eloquent letters to the editor of the *North Port Sun*. He led neighbors in a successful protest against overhead power lines. He was a regular at the 7:15 breakfasts of the North Port Early Bird Kiwanis Club. And when city commissioners gathered to hash out North Port's annual budget, Fritz—a tall, lean man with chiseled features and dark hair, to judge by a video of the meeting—sat through hours of tedious discussion for a chance to harangue the elected leaders about a proposed recession-year tax hike.

When I ran Fritz's name through a database of Florida incorporations, I found that the auto-parts firm wasn't the only business he had ties to. In 1995, Fritz had founded a company called Nefer Art. *Nefer* is the Egyptian word for "beauty." If someone close to Laukamp had an affinity for Egyptian art, that person was worth talking to: Coptic was an Egyptian language, and nearly all ancient papyri come from Egypt.

I ran *Walter Fritz* and *Egypt* through some search engines, and one hit caught my eye: In 1991, someone named Walter Fritz had published an article in a prestigious German-language journal, *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*, or *Studies in Ancient Egyptian Culture*. He had used infrared photography to decode textual minutiae on a 3,400-year-old Egyptian tablet. The journal listed his affiliation as the Egyptology institute at Berlin's Free University—the very place that had also employed Peter Munro and his colleague who had supposedly examined Hans-Ulrich Laukamp's papyri in 1982.

I wondered whether the author of the article and the Florida auto-parts executive could possibly be the same man. I called several prominent Egyptologists, who told me that the article—which had reoriented a debate over whether Akhenaten and his father served alone as pharaohs or together as co-regents—remained influential. But none of them—not even the journal's former editors—could recall who Walter Fritz was or what had become of him.

I FLEW TO FLORIDA in November to learn more about Laukamp, but Fritz had come to seem almost as interesting. I planned to knock on his door with some questions. But when I pulled up to Fritz's three-acre lot, my heart sank: The property had no bell or intercom, just a forbidding gate at the end of a driveway that snaked behind a curtain of muscadine vine and Virginia creeper. A twitchy brown dog watched me from beneath a NO TRESPASSING sign. I idled my rental car outside the gate, considered my options, and then drove back to my hotel.

I called Fritz the next morning and told him I was in town working on a story about Laukamp and the Jesus's-wife papyrus. I asked to meet him. He abruptly declined, grew agitated, and made clear he wanted to get off the phone.

He had never studied Egyptology at the Free University, he said. He had never written an article for a German journal. Though the Web site for Laukamp and Herzsprung's business had listed Fritz as the president of its U.S. branch, he told me he was in fact just a consultant who had helped get the company incorporated. He couldn't even recall how he'd met Laukamp.

But when I asked whether Laukamp had been interested in antiquities, Fritz bristled. "He was interested in a lot of things," he said.

Like what?, I asked.

"I know he had a beer-mug collection."

He then alluded, somewhat cryptically, to the question of the papyrus's authenticity. "There will always be people who say yes and people who say no," he told me. "Everybody is up in arms and has an opinion."

I asked him what his opinion was.

"I don't want to comment."

Are you the owner?, I asked.

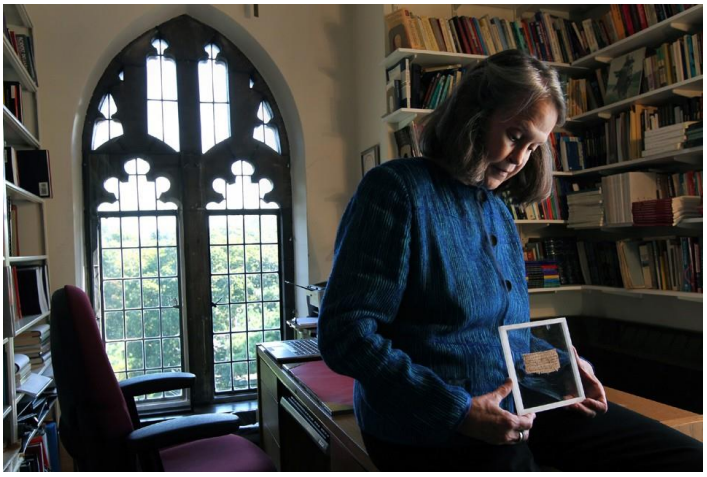
"No," he said. "Who said that?"

No one, I answered, but since he was one of Laukamp's few American acquaintances, I wanted to be sure.

He wasn't the owner, Fritz insisted. He had no idea who was.

KAREN KING is the first woman to hold Harvard's 295-year-old Hollis Professorship of Divinity, one of the country's loftiest perches in religious studies. The daughter of a pharmacist and a schoolteacher from a Montana cattle town, King enrolled at the University of Montana, where a course on marginalized Christian texts spoke to her in almost personal terms. "I already had this sense of not fitting in," King told me in 2012. "From grade school on, I was the kid who was picked on," she said. "I thought if I could figure out [these texts], then I could figure out what was wrong with me."

She earned a doctorate in the history of religions from Brown in 1984 and by 1991 had become the chair of both religious studies and women's studies at Occidental College. Harvard Divinity School hired her in 1997.



Before Karen King went public, an anonymous peer reviewer delivered a punishing critique. (*The Boston Globe* / Getty)

The Jesus's-wife fragment fit neatly with what has become her life's work: resurrecting the diversity of voices in Christianity's formative years. Early Christians were a disputatious bunch, with often conflicting views on the meaning of Jesus's life and teachings. But after Constantine converted the Roman empire to Christianity in the fourth century and Church leaders began canonizing the small selection of texts that form the New Testament, Christians with other views were branded heretics.

King has been particularly interested in noncanonical, or Gnostic, texts that assign Mary Magdalene a prominent role as Jesus's confidante and disciple. Proof that some early Christians also saw Mary Magdalene as Jesus's wife would be a rebuke to Church patriarchs who had discounted her and conflated her, falsely, with two other women mentioned in the Gospels: an unnamed adulteress in John and an unnamed woman—thought to be a prostitute—in Luke.

From the beginning, King was up front about the puzzles the Jesus's-wife scrap posed. Its text spans 14 lines on the front and back, forming incomplete phrases presumably snipped from a larger manuscript. "Jesus said to them, My wife" is the most arresting line, but others are also striking: "She is able to be my disciple"; "I dwell with her."

In our interviews late in the summer of 2012, King said she expected a vigorous debate over the papyrus's meaning. She stressed that the fragment was all but worthless as biography: It was composed centuries after Jesus's death. It showed merely that one group of ancient Christians believed Jesus had been married.

Before going public, King asked some of the world's leading experts in papyrology and the Coptic language for their take on the fragment: Roger Bagnall, a distinguished papyrologist who directs the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University; AnneMarie Luijendijk, an authority on Coptic handwriting at Princeton who obtained her doctorate under King at Harvard; and Ariel Shisha-Halevy, a Coptic linguist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. All three thought the papyrus looked authentic.

But others weren't convinced. In the summer of 2012, the *Harvard Theological Review* sent King's draft to peer reviewers. One was supportive, but another delivered a punishing critique of the papyrus's grammatical irregularities and handwriting.

I happened to arrive in Cambridge, to interview King, on the afternoon she received word of the unfavorable review. "There was a crisis," she said, apologizing for arriving a little late to our first meeting.

"My first response was shock," she told me over dinner that night. "My second reaction was 'Well, let's get this settled.' " She said that if her own panel of experts agreed with the skeptical reviewer, she would abandon her plans to announce the find in Rome. She knew how high the stakes were, for both history and her own reputation. Some of the world's most prestigious institutions—the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre—had been hoodwinked by forgers, and she didn't want Harvard added to the list. "If it's a forgery," she told *The Boston Globe*, "it's a career breaker."

I was interviewing King in her office the next day when an e-mail from Roger Bagnall popped into her inbox. She lifted her glasses and leaned into the computer screen. Bagnall suggested that she revise her article to address a few of the reviewer's concerns, but he was otherwise unpersuaded.

"Yeah, okay!" King said, clearly buoyed. "Go, Roger!"

It was one of the assurances she needed to move forward.

THE CASE FOR FORGERY, at first confined to lively posts on academic blogs, took a more formal turn last summer, when *New Testament Studies*, a peer-reviewed journal published by the University of Cambridge, devoted an entire issue to the fragment's detractors. In one of the articles, Christopher Jones, a Harvard classicist, noted that a forger may have identified King as a "mark" because of her feminist scholarship. "Either he intended to find a sympathetic person or institution to whom to sell his wares," Jones wrote, "or more diabolically intended his fraud as a bomb, primed to blow up and to discredit such scholarship (or perhaps the institution) when it was exposed."

King never ruled out the possibility of forgery, but she continued to warn against a rush to judgment. More scientific tests were under way, and the similarities with the Gospel of Thomas were hardly incriminating. Ancient scribes often borrowed language from other texts, King wrote in the *Harvard Theological Review*; the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—with their overlapping yet "theologically distinctive" narratives—were a case in point.

On a more practical level, she couldn't see how a con artist cunning enough to produce a scientifically undetectable forgery could at the same time be so clumsy with Coptic handwriting and grammar. "In my judgment," she wrote, "such a combination of bumbling and sophistication seems extremely unlikely." The crude writing, she argued, could simply indicate that the ancient scribe was a novice.

Yet "a combination of bumbling and sophistication" could well be the epitaph of many of history's most infamous forgers, their painstaking precision undone by a few careless oversights.

In the mid-1980s, a master forger from Utah named Mark Hofmann duped experts with manuscripts he claimed to have found that would have upended the official history of the Mormon Church. He used antique paper; made ink from historic recipes; and artificially aged his manuscripts with gelatin, chemical solutions, and a vacuum cleaner. But Hofmann was unmasked after a pipe bomb—which police believe was intended for someone he feared might expose him—blew up in his own car.

Before he was caught, Hofmann made an estimated $2 million selling his bogus manuscripts. Young, shy, and self-effacing—*The New York Times* called him a "scholarly country bumpkin"—he targeted buyers predisposed, by ideological bent or professional interest, to believe his documents were real. He often expressed doubts about his finds, making experts feel they were discovering signs of authenticity that he himself had somehow missed. "Usually he just leaned back quietly and let his delighted victim do the authentication, adding now and then a quiet, 'Do you really think it's genuine?,' " Charles Hamilton, once the country's leading forgery examiner, and one of the many people Hofmann fooled, recalled in a 1996 book.

Reading about Hofmann called to mind the curious e-mails the owner of the Jesus's-wife papyrus had sent to King. In some messages, the owner comes across as a hapless layman, addressing King as "Mrs." rather than "Dr." or "Professor" and claiming that he didn't read Coptic and was "completely clueless." In other messages, however, he is far more knowing. He sends King a translation of the Coptic that he says "seems to make sense." He specifies its dialect (Sahidic) and likely vintage (third to fifth century A.D.), and asks that any carbon dating use "a few fibers only," to avoid damaging the papyrus. Also strange is that he tells King he acquired the Jesus's-wife fragment in 1997, then gives her a sales contract dated two years later.

When I called Joe Barabe, a renowned microscopist who has helped expose several infamous fakes, he told me that most forgers try to unload their creations on the unwitting; scholars are usually the last people they want eyeballing their handiwork. So what kind of forger, I asked, might seek approval from one of the world's leading historians of early Christianity?

"A pretty gutsy one," Barabe told me. "You'd have to have a sense of *Can I get away with this?*"

AFTER WALTER FRITZ rebuffed my request to meet in Florida, I called the *North Port Sun* and asked whether its staff had ever photographed him. A friendly reporter e-mailed me an image of Fritz surveying a mulch pile—the paper had covered his long-running crusade against a wood-chipping plant he felt was blighting the neighborhood.

I e-mailed Karl Jansen-Winkeln, a longtime Egyptologist at Berlin's Free University. Did he by chance know the Walter Fritz who'd written a 1991 article in *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*?

Jansen-Winkeln replied that he did: Fritz had been a master's student from about 1988 until about the time the article was published. "He left the university without a final examination," Jansen-Winkeln wrote. "I have never seen him again after 1992 or 1993."

That night, I e-mailed Jansen-Winkeln the *North Port Sun* photo. Did this man look anything like the student he'd known two decades earlier?

Jansen-Winkeln's reply was waiting in my inbox the next morning: "The man looks indeed like Walter Fritz."

It was the first sign that Fritz might have lied during our phone call. I wondered why a promising student, a young man who'd landed an article in a premier journal early in his studies, would suddenly drop out of his master's program. I tracked down several people who'd known Fritz at the Free University, but no one had any idea.

"One day he just disappeared," one woman wrote, in a typical reply. "Is he still alive?"

Judging from public records, Fritz arrived in Florida no later than 1993. In 1995, he incorporated Nefer Art. The company's Web site advertised a peculiar miscellany of services: wedding photography, "erotic portrait photography," and "documenting, photographing, publishing, and selling your valuable art collection."

A page of uncaptioned photographs, titled "Gallery Art," included a relief of Pharaoh Akhenaten and a pietà, a sculpture of the Virgin Mary cradling the crucified Jesus. Also featured were fragments of two seemingly ancient manuscripts—one in Arabic and another in Greek.

I e-mailed the images of these manuscripts to a few scholars, who found them almost comical. The Greek one, which bore a drawing of a nude woman, superficially resembled texts from Greco-Roman-era Egypt known as "magical papyri." But the Greek words made little sense, the scholars said, and the script was more or less modern print. "Perhaps not in Times New Roman," Sofía Torallas Tovar, a papyrologist at the University of Chicago, observed

drily, “but in a modern typography.” The drawing of the female figure, meanwhile, was “in a style unparalleled to my knowledge in an ancient document, but easily found in modern school notebooks.”

Walter Fritz (*standing left, second from the top*) in 1989 with fellow students on the steps of the Free University’s Egyptology institute (Courtesy of Christian E. Loeben)

Two experts in ancient Arabic manuscripts told me that the script on the other fragment was backwards, as if someone had photographed it in a mirror.

What happened next felt almost too easy. I dropped Fritz’s name and e-mail address into Google, and up came a link to a site that tracks the history of domain-name registrations. On August 26, 2012—more than three weeks before King announced her discovery to the world, when only her inner circle knew of the papyrus and her name for it—Walter Fritz registered the domain name www.gospelofjesuswife.com.

It was my first piece of hard evidence linking Fritz to the papyrus. In January, I flew to Germany to search for more.

THE TAXI RIDE from Tegel Airport into the heart of Berlin was a blind slog through labyrinths of graffiti-clad apartment blocks, in fog and light snow.

On a cold Sunday afternoon, my interpreter and I showed up unannounced at the apartment of René Ernest, Hans-Ulrich Laukamp’s stepson and closest living relative. Ernest and his wife, Gabriele, led us into their small living room and said they were mystified by what they’d heard about Laukamp’s supposed ownership of the papyrus.

Laukamp had lived in Potsdam, in Soviet-occupied East Germany, as a child. As a young man, he fled to West Berlin by swimming across the Griebnitzsee, a lake on the border. The Ernests didn’t know the exact date of the swim, but Laukamp’s immigration papers suggest that it was in October 1961, two months after the Berlin Wall went up, when he was 18 years old. A friend of Laukamp’s said he arrived in West Berlin with nothing more than his swimsuit.

The story of Laukamp acquiring six Coptic papyri in Potsdam in 1963 thus seemed to hinge on a dubious scenario: that not long after his illegal escape, he slipped back into East Germany, got the papyri, and then risked his freedom—and possibly his life—in a second illicit crossing to the West.

Another problem was that until Laukamp went into the auto-parts business with Axel Herzsprung in the mid-1990s, he’d been a humble toolmaker who didn’t collect anything—not even beer mugs, the Ernests said, though they acknowledged his fondness for drinking. “If he had ever owned or bought this thing, after his third beer at the pub he would have told everybody about his great coup,” Gabriele Ernest told me. “And if I knew my father-in-law, he would have immediately tried to make money from it.”

I told the Ernests about the 1982 letter that the fragment’s owner had given Karen King—the one in which Peter Munro tells Laukamp that one of his papyri might be a fragment from the Gospel of John. Could they picture Laukamp seeking a consultation with a university Egyptologist?

The Ernests gave each other a look, then burst out laughing. Laukamp had the minimum schooling required by German law, they said—the equivalent of eighth grade. His milieu was the bar on his street that served as his "second living room," not the college campus across town.

(When I reached Peter Munro's ex-wife by phone a couple of days later, she found the story just as preposterous. In 1982, Irmtraut Munro had been learning Coptic and studying papyri while working toward a doctorate in Egyptology. If her then-husband had come across an interesting Coptic papyrus, she said, "he would have told me about it.")

I asked the Ernests how Laukamp's signature might have wound up on the sales contract for the papyri. "He was a person who very easily believed things he was told," Gabriele told me. He was good-hearted, she said, recalling how he brought breakfast to a homeless man in a park where he walked his dog. But he was "simple" and "weak," a man who was easily misled.

When I mentioned the name Walter Fritz, she stiffened. "I can easily imagine Walter Fritz saying, 'I need your signature for the company,' " she said. Laukamp "would have signed that without reading everything."

AS I SPOKE with people around Berlin, a picture of Fritz began to take shape.

When I entered a metal-machining workshop on the outskirts of Berlin one drizzly afternoon, the owner, Peter Biberger, who'd done business with Laukamp's company, answered wordlessly when I asked his opinion of Walter Fritz: He moved his forearm in a slither, like a creature swimming through murk. "He was an eel," Biberger explained. "You couldn't hold him. He slipped through your fingers."

When Fritz turned up at the Free University around 1988, it was in the guise of a man who already had it made. On a campus where student fashions ran to grungy jeans and T-shirts, he often wore elegant dress shirts and blazers. He owned two cars, both Mercedeses.

Fritz's zeal for Egyptology was just as conspicuous. He got a job as a tour guide at Berlin's Egyptian Museum. He backpacked around Egypt; took a class with Munro, the resident expert on Egyptian art; and joked, one classmate recalled, that the randomly assigned letters on his license plate—which mirrored the academic shorthand for a group of Egyptian funerary spells—foretold an illustrious future in the field.

His superiors, however, told me his enthusiasm wasn't always matched by hard work. "Fritz was quite eager and interested in Egyptology, but he was the type who was reluctant to take much effort," Karl Jansen-Winkeln, the professor who identified Fritz in the *North Port Sun* photograph, said when we met for coffee near campus. Jansen-Winkeln, who taught a class that Fritz attended, recalled his Coptic as "not very good."

"He appeared to me like a person who wants to sell you something and not like a person who's really interested in research."

"He paid a lot of attention—how would I say this?—to what other people thought of him," Christian E. Loeben, an Egyptologist who had worked for Munro and considered Fritz a friend, recalled when I visited his office at the August Kestner Museum, in Hannover. "He would wait to see what his counterpart expected," and then turn himself into that person's "little darling."

The arrival of a new department chair in 1989 may have sealed Fritz's fate. Jürgen Osing was a respected scholar of Egyptian languages but a harsh and exacting teacher. In the whole of Osing's career, I'd heard, just three students managed to complete a doctorate under him.

Fritz's 1991 article might have been his ticket to a promising future in Egyptology. He had gotten one of the Amarna letters—clay tablets of correspondence to Egyptian pharaohs from rulers in the Near East—shuttled from a museum of Near Eastern history in the former East Berlin to the Egyptian Museum, which had the facilities for a more sophisticated photographic study of its partly legible text.

"There was a little problem," Jansen-Winkeln told me: The article angered Osing. "Fritz went to the museum to copy the Amarna letter and make a photograph, but many of the conclusions he reached in the paper were what he had

heard in Osing's Egyptian-history class." Fritz did thank Osing in the article's first footnote, and cited him twice more. But Jansen-Winkeln says the article's key findings "were not [Fritz's] ideas."

Reached by phone in December, Osing recalled almost nothing about Fritz or his article. What he and everyone else agreed on, however, was that soon after Fritz's paper was published, he vanished from campus. None of them ever heard from him again.

MY TRAIL MIGHT HAVE gone cold there if not for a hazy memory: Two of Fritz's acquaintances recalled him materializing briefly in the early 1990s as the head of some new museum of East German history. This rumor had always baffled them—Fritz had no training in the subject. When I pressed for details, a former classmate recalled that a blurb about Fritz's appointment had appeared in *Stern*, a major German magazine.

After I returned from Berlin to my home in Washington, D.C., I asked the Library of Congress to pull every issue of *Stern* from 1991 to 1994. After an hour of page-flipping, I found it. In the February 27, 1992, issue, sandwiched between notices about celebrities like Glenn Close and La Toya Jackson, was a photo of Fritz, in a tie and three-button blazer, standing beside a painting of Erich Mielke, the dreaded chief of the Stasi, the East German secret police.

"Walter Fritz, 27, antiquities scholar, is the successor of Erich Mielke—at his desk in the former East Berlin Stasi headquarters," the notice began. He wasn't Mielke's actual successor, the article made clear, but the head of a new museum in the former Stasi headquarters.

When my interpreter called Jörg Drieselmann, the longtime director of the Stasi Museum, he remembered Fritz well. In 1990, soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, East German activists had seized the Stasi compound, to prevent former Stasi officials from destroying their intelligence files. The activists wanted the building preserved as a research center, museum, and memorial.

Fritz applied for the job of museum director. "Nobody from the group knew him," Drieselmann, who was a co-leader of the activists, said. But Fritz made a convincing case: "He had come from the Egyptian Museum in West Berlin, so he was experienced in museum work."

In 1992, *Stern*, a German magazine, covered Fritz's appointment as the director of a new museum in the former Stasi headquarters in Berlin. (Library of Congress)

When asked whether the activists had known that Fritz's museum experience consisted of giving tours, Drieselmann said they may not have probed that deeply. The mere fact that he was a "Wessi"—a West German—made him a "fascination" to the East Berliners who hired him in October 1991.

Drieselmann said that Fritz excelled at self-promotion but was less impressive as an administrator. In March 1992, five months into the job, the museum's board members ordered him to shape up. They were concerned, among other things, about valuables—paintings, Nazi military medals, Stasi memorabilia—that had gone missing from the building's storage during Fritz's tenure. Drieselmann confronted him about his job performance in the spring of 1992. Not long after, Fritz disappeared, leaving behind a resignation letter.

"I don't want to raise allegations, but it is possible that a West German knew much better than us inexperienced East Germans that these [objects] were easy to sell—and worthwhile selling," said Drieselmann, who replaced Fritz in 1992 and has led the museum ever since. He said that there was never an investigation into whether Fritz misappropriated anything, and that none of his suspicions were ever proved.

FRITZ'S CAREER CHANGE from Egyptology student to Stasi Museum chief was unusual. But his reappearance as an auto-parts executive a few years later was stranger still.

During my trip to Germany in January, my interpreter and I rode the subway to Haselhorst, a drab industrial quarter on Berlin's western border. We entered Herzsprung Drehteile GmbH, a metal-parts factory, and knocked on the door of the chief executive, Axel Herzsprung—the toolmaker who'd been Laukamp's friend and business partner. A potbellied man with a wry air, Herzsprung seemed unruffled by our unannounced visit.

In my brief phone chat with Fritz, he'd said he couldn't recall how he and Laukamp had met. Herzsprung's memory was clearer. "They met in a sauna," he said. Sometime between 1992 and 1995, he said, Fritz had struck up a conversation with Laukamp, who was 22 years his senior, in the steam room of a Berlin fitness center they both frequented.

How did a stranger in a sauna become a top executive of their auto-parts company?, I asked. "He snuck in," Herzsprung said, bitterness edging his voice. "He was very eloquent. Laukamp was easily influenced—he didn't have a very high IQ—and Fritz was successful in talking his way in."

Herzsprung made no effort to hide his hatred of Fritz. "I was so angry at him that I thought it was better we never meet in the dark somewhere," he told me. Each blames the other for the company's 2002 bankruptcy: During my phone call with Fritz, he accused Herzsprung of embezzlement; Herzsprung, meanwhile, accused Fritz of a Machiavellian plot to take over the business by driving a wedge between Herzsprung and Laukamp. As the company imploded, Fritz—who split his time between Florida and Germany—persuaded BMW to let him take its contract to a different business in Berlin, APG Automotive Parts.

When I found APG's owner at home one evening in a working-class fringe of Berlin, he told me that the business had thrived for a few years. It drew annual profits of some $250,000, thanks in part to Fritz's sales talent and the BMW work he'd brought with him. But APG began dissolution proceedings in February 2008, after a former employee broke into its warehouse, the owner said, and destroyed the main machine that made brake parts.

Two months later, Fritz tried to sell his North Port house, to no avail. In February 2010, he listed it again, lowering the asking price by more than a third, from $349,000 to $229,900. On July 8, 2010, the house still unsold, Fritz had an angry letter published in the *North Port Sun*, demanding layoffs and 35 percent salary reductions for highly paid city staffers—it was the right thing to do, he argued, given the pay cuts and joblessness people in the business world were facing.

The next day, Karen King received her first e-mail from a man claiming to have an interesting set of Coptic papyrus fragments.

BY EVERY INDICATION, Fritz had the skills and knowledge to forge the Jesus's-wife papyrus. He was the missing link between all the players in the provenance story. He'd proved adept at deciphering enigmatic Egyptian text. He had a salesman's silver tongue, which kept Laukamp and possibly others in his thrall. Perhaps most important, he'd studied Coptic but had never been very good at it—which could explain the "combination of bumbling and sophistication" that King had deemed "extremely unlikely" in a forger.

But if Fritz did do it, what was his motive?

Money drives many forgers, and by 2010 Fritz's assets certainly appear to have taken a beating. The owner of the papyrus agreed to loan it to Harvard for 10 years, but that's hardly exculpatory: An Ivy League imprimatur could produce a kind of halo effect, giving a forger cover to sell other fakes with less scrutiny.

But there was another possibility. If Fritz had seen his Egyptology dreams thwarted, maybe he nursed a grudge against the elite scholars who had failed to appreciate his intellectual gifts—who had told him he was mediocre at Coptic and short on original ideas. Not a few forgers over the decades have been driven by a desire to show up the experts.

Or maybe even this theory was too simple. Curious whether Fritz owned any domain names besides gospelofjesuswife.com, I ran a search of Web registrations. When the results came back, I felt as if I'd fallen down a rabbit hole.

Beginning in 2003, Fritz had launched a series of pornographic sites that showcased his wife having sex with other men—often more than one at a time. One home page billed her as "America's #1 Slut Wife." The couple advertised the dates and locations of "gangbangs" and asked interested men to e-mail "Walt" a photo and phone number, so he could clear them to attend. There was no charge, but the men had to agree to Walt's filming.

"I just wanted to thank you for a wonderful time during the gangbang on Friday," someone named Doug was quoted as saying on the fan-mail page of one of the sites. "Don't get me wrong Walt you are a great guy, but [your wife] … Wow!!!"

All of the sites seem to have been taken down in late 2014 and early 2015. But archived pages and free images and videos were easy to find online. In an interview on a German-language Web site, Fritz's wife, under her porn name, described herself as the daughter of a U.S. military officer who had been stationed in Berlin when she was a teenager. She and Fritz met in Florida in the 1990s, and he encouraged her to act out their shared fantasies of her having sex with other men.

Fritz appears in a few videos, but he is more often behind the camera. He included a bio on one site, under his occasional porn name, Wolf: "I am a 45 year old executive, living in S. Florida. Stats: 6'2", 185 lbs., brown hair, slim, no belly, clean cut, and well endowed." Then he went on to list his academic credentials, as if for a LinkedIn profile: "I am college-educated with a technical MA-degree form [*sic*] a major university, and an associate degree in arts. I speak three languages fluently and read two old languages."

This juxtaposition of lewd and learned appears in still sharper relief on one of his wife's sites, where passages from Goethe, Proust, and Edna St. Vincent Millay are interspersed with philosophical musings on Jesus's teachings, the slippery nature of reality, and "the Perfection of Sluthood."

After trawling regions of the Web I hadn't even known existed, I discovered that Fritz's wife, under her porn name, enjoyed a measure of fame. Before Yahoo shut it down in 2004, she boasted online, her "Femalebarebackgangbangextreme" discussion group had nearly 50,000 members. The couple's work belonged to a fetish genre built around fantasies of cuckolded husbands powerless to stop their wives' lust for other men. The genre is called "hotwife."

WHEN I MENTIONED these findings to my own wife, she told me to read *The Da Vinci Code*. Studied closely, she said, the book could be a Rosetta stone for Fritz's motives.

Dan Brown's best seller is fiction, of course, but it draws on the work of feminist religious scholars like King. Its premise is that conservative forces in the Roman Catholic Church silenced early Christians who saw sex as holy and women as the equals—or even the saviors—of men. Threatened by these vestiges of pagan goddess worship, Church fathers defamed Mary Magdalene and enshrined the all-male priesthood to keep women out.

Brown's chief point of departure from scholars like King is his made-for-Hollywood plot, which turns on a Catholic conspiracy to destroy evidence of Jesus's marriage to—and child with—Mary Magdalene. A clandestine society whose past members include Leonardo da Vinci and Sir Isaac Newton has resolved to keep alive the secret of Jesus's

marriage, along with an ancient practice that celebrated the sanctity of sexual intercourse. In a pivotal scene, members of the society take part in a ritualistic orgy.

"For the early Church, mankind's use of sex to commune directly with God posed a serious threat to the Catholic power base," the book's protagonist, Robert Langdon, explains. "For obvious reasons, they worked hard to demonize sex and recast it as a disgusting and sinful act."

I wondered whether Fritz and his wife had seen in the book a way to sanctify their adventurous sex life, to cloak it in the garb of faith. The couple launched their first porn site in April 2003, a month after *The Da Vinci Code* was published. Perhaps they had spun a fantasy of Fritz—whose birthday happens to be Christmas—as a kind of Jesus figure, and his wife as a latter-day Mary Magdalene.

In 2015, Fritz's wife self-published a book of "universal truths" that she claims is a product of divinely inspired "automatic writing." God and the archangel Michael, she says, speak through her. The dates on its diarylike entries overlap with the papyrus owner's e-mail courtship of King. "Knowledge as you know, is what brings forth the fortune," she wrote in the penultimate entry, dated August 29, 2012, less than three weeks before King's announcement in Rome. "For all the Bibles and all the churches in the entire world, cannot give you what you can give to yourself."

Could Fritz and his wife have convinced themselves that a higher being was guiding his hands, too? To turn a *Da Vinci Code* fantasy into reality, all you needed was material proof of Jesus's marriage, and a real-life Robert Langdon. In the book, Langdon—a Harvard professor of "religious symbology"—finds the modern descendants of Jesus and Mary Magdalene's daughter thanks to a cryptic message on a scrap of papyrus. Perhaps Fritz and his wife had found their Langdon in Karen King.

NEARLY FOUR MONTHS had passed since I'd first spoken with Walter Fritz. The time had come to call him again.

When he answered, on a Monday morning in March, I laid out what I'd discovered: his training in Egyptology, his ties to the Free University, the fact that he'd registered gospelofjesuswife.com weeks before King's announcement.

"So what is it you want to know?" he asked.

The truth about the papyrus, I said. All the evidence pointed to him as the owner.

"Maybe I know the person who owns it," he said. He claimed the papyrus's owner was a friend whose identity he was not at liberty to disclose. When I asked him whether he'd had any contact with Karen King, he said he had never met her but had talked with her briefly "just to clarify something."

I mentioned the allegations of forgery.

"No owner has ever claimed this is real," he said of the papyrus. He was right: In the e-mails to King, the owner never said he had an authentic piece of antiquity. He wanted King's opinion about that very question, and in the end she and the experts she consulted could find no signs of fabrication.

Fritz also confirmed something else people I'd met in Germany had told me: that he had obtained a technical degree in architecture in Berlin and kept a drawing board in his apartment. That is, he not only had studied Egyptology, but could draw—a skill that might help someone convincingly mimic ancient script. With that background, I said, he must have expected questions about his role in a possible forgery, whether he was the owner or not.

"Let's be the devil's advocate and say either Mr. Laukamp or I conspired to forge a papyrus to make a statement," he said when we spoke again later that week. "Well, there is still no scientific evidence at this point that we did it."

But could he have pulled off a near-perfect forgery if he'd wanted to?

"Well, to a certain degree, probably," he said. "But to a degree that it is absolutely undetectable to the newest scientific methods, I don't know."

I didn't understand these hedges, so I asked point-blank whether he had forged the Gospel of Jesus's Wife. His response was unequivocal: "No."

Fritz denied having money problems at the time he contacted Karen King. He also disputed the idea that he'd had trouble at the Free University or the Stasi Museum. Though he acknowledged that some items had gone missing from the museum during his tenure, he said so many people had had access to the building that he had been powerless to intervene. He said he'd resigned because he'd realized that an East German would be better suited for the job. He e-mailed me a photo of a short but adulatory 1992 reference letter from Jörg Drieselmann. (Drieselmann couldn't recall writing the letter but said it was possible he had.)

As for the Free University's Egyptology program, Fritz told me he'd quit because fields like real estate and business offered better job prospects. All the same, memories of his university years clearly rankled. He denied ever butting heads with Osing, but called him an "asshole" who seemed to take a perverse pleasure in humiliating students. He described the department as rife with backstabbers, and dismissed the entire field of Egyptology as a "pseudoscience."

He had even more scorn for critics of the Jesus's-wife papyrus, deriding them as "county level" scholars from the "University of Eastern Pee-Pee Land" who think their nitpicking of Coptic phrases can compete with scientific tests at places like Columbia University and MIT that have yielded no physical proof of forgery.

FRITZ TOLD ME to call again in two weeks, and when I did, he said to check my inbox for an e-mailed statement. It read:

> Dear Mr. Sabar:
>
> I, Walter Fritz, herewith certify that I am the sole owner of a papyrus fragment … which was named "Gospel of Jesus's Wife" …
>
> I warrant that neither I, nor any third parties have forged, altered, or manipulated the fragment and/or its inscription in any way since it was acquired by me. The previous owner gave no indications that the fragment was tampered with either.

Over the next four and a half hours, Fritz told me the following story: He had first met Hans-Ulrich Laukamp in Berlin in the early 1990s, at a talk by the best-selling Swiss author Erich von Däniken, who'd become famous in the late 1960s for his theory that space aliens—or "ancient astronauts"—helped build the pyramids, Stonehenge, and other landmarks that seemed beyond the capacities of "primitive" man. Fritz said he struck up a conversation with Laukamp afterward—Laukamp bought von Däniken's theories; Fritz didn't—and continued it over beers at a pub across the street. He said Laukamp liked to sit in on classes at the Free University, and they had lunch together there. They did occasionally go to a sauna, he said, but that was after the von Däniken talk.

Fritz said Laukamp first told him about his papyrus collection in Berlin in the mid-1990s. Then, in Florida, in November 1999, Laukamp sold him the half-dozen fragments, for $1,500. Fritz photographed the papyri, conserved them between plexiglass, and placed them in a safe-deposit box, where they remained untouched for a decade.

In 2009, Fritz said, he was in London on a business trip when he stopped by the shop of an art dealer he knew. Fritz told the dealer he had some papyri to sell, and the dealer invited him to e-mail photos.

Walter Fritz in Sarasota, Florida, this spring (Lisette Poole)

Fritz said he would have been happy to get about $5,000 for the Jesus's-wife fragment, but three months later, the dealer called and offered him some $50,000. Fritz e-mailed King, whose books and articles he had read: He wanted her to give him a sense of why a dealer would offer so much. But when the dealer heard that Fritz had approached an expert, he angrily cut off negotiations. In December 2011, Fritz traveled to Harvard to deliver the papyrus to King.

The story had an airtight logic. But it was nearly impervious to verification. In his original e-mails to King, Fritz had claimed that "someone in Germany" had translated the Jesus's-wife fragment in the 1980s, and that a Coptic priest had "recently" translated another of Laukamp's papyri. I would have liked to speak with either of them, but when I asked who they were, Fritz confessed that he'd in fact translated the fragments himself, using a Coptic dictionary and grammar book from his university days. He lied to King about it, he said, because he didn't want to be "embarrassed" if his Coptic skills had grown rusty.

I asked Fritz whether there was anyone alive who could vouch for any part of the provenance story—the London art dealer, someone who had known Laukamp to collect papyri, or anyone who had seen Fritz with Laukamp at the von Däniken talk or at the Free University.

Did he have a single corroborating source to whom he could refer me?

"I don't," he said. "It's very unfortunate."

Video: Down the Rabbit Hole

Inside the author's hunt for the gospel's owner

I CALLED KAREN KING later that day to ask whether we could meet. I wanted her perspective on what I'd found and was curious about how much she already knew. I wondered, too, whether any of it would color her view of the papyrus's authenticity.

But King wasn't interested in talking. "I haven't engaged the provenance questions at all," she said. What she did know, she'd already reported in her 2014 *Harvard Theological Review* article. "It's all out there," she said. "I don't see the point of a conversation."

I told her I'd spent months reporting in Germany and the United States. Didn't she want to know what I'd found?

"Not particularly," she said. She would read my piece once it was published. What interested her more were the results of new ink tests being done at Columbia.

Fritz told me he'd mentioned to King that we'd spoken. Before she cut short our call, I asked her why he'd never provided originals of his provenance papers—the 1982 Munro letter, the 1999 sales contract, the unsigned note that seemed to refer to the Jesus's-wife papyrus. "You're in contact with Walt Fritz," she said. "Why not ask him?"

All right, I thought.

But why hadn't she at least released her copies of Fritz's papers, as many scholars had requested?, I asked.

"I don't think they're good data," she said. Nothing useful could be gleaned from a scan of a photocopy, which was, after all, just "an image of an image."

I wasn't so sure.

Forensic specialists had told me early on that anyone with the technical skill to fake an ancient Coptic papyrus would have no trouble concocting modern-day provenance papers. But after reading a short history of manuscript forgery by Christopher Jones, the Harvard classicist, in last July's *New Testament Studies*, I wondered whether they'd gotten it backwards. "Perhaps the hardest thing of all to forge is provenance," Jones wrote. A manuscript is a physical object; to convincingly fake one, all you need are the right tools and materials. Provenance, however, is historical fact: a trail of dates, places, buyers, sellers. To convincingly fake provenance, you need to rewrite history—often recent history.

Fritz's contract for the purchase of Laukamp's papyri was dated November 12, 1999. When I asked Fritz where the sale had taken place, he said it was in the kitchen of Laukamp's home in Florida. But Helga Laukamp's son and daughter-in-law, the Ernests, had told me that Laukamp was at his dying wife's bedside at that time. He had brought Helga back to Germany no later than October 1999, the Ernests said, after a Florida doctor diagnosed her terminal lung cancer. She died there two months later, in December, and Laukamp hadn't left her side, much less Europe. Laukamp "spent every day at her hospital bed" at the Heckeshorn Lung Clinic, in Berlin, Gabriele Ernest told me.

Later, at my request, Fritz e-mailed me a photo of his copy of Peter Munro's 1982 letter, about Laukamp's Gospel of John fragment. When I forwarded it to a close colleague of Munro's, he wrote back that the signature and stationery looked "100% authentic."

But later, I noticed two errors in the street address for Laukamp's Berlin apartment. Not only are the building number and postal code incorrect, but no such address existed. The letter, it seemed, warranted a closer look.

On the advice of a forensic document examiner, I sought as many of Munro's letters from the early 1980s through the mid-1990s as I could. Soon, scans were arriving by e-mail from a former doctoral student; a Dutch Egyptologist who has custody of Munro's archives; a Free University professor; and the same Munro colleague who initially thought the letter looked genuine—a position he quickly backed away from after seeing other Munro letters.

The problems were endemic. A word that should have been typed with a special German character—a so-called sharp *S*, which Munro used in typewritten correspondence throughout the '80s and early '90s—was instead rendered with two ordinary *S*'s, a sign that the letter may have been composed on a non-German typewriter or after Germany's 1996 spelling reform, or both.

In fact, all the available evidence suggests that the 1982 letter isn't from the 1980s. Its Courier typeface does not appear in the other Munro correspondence I gathered until the early '90s—Fritz's final years at the university. The same is true of the letterhead. The school's Egyptology institute began using it only around April 1990.

As a student of Munro's, Fritz may well have received correspondence from the professor—a letter of recommendation, for example, or a note certifying that he'd completed a course. It would not be difficult, the forensic examiner told me, to take an authentic letter, lay a sheet of new typewritten text across its middle, and make a photocopy. This might explain why Munro's typewritten name at the bottom of the letter is parallel with the stationery's design elements, while the rest of the text sits slightly askew. It might also explain why no original exists.

When I asked Fritz for explanations, he did some hemming and hawing but never sounded rattled. As for the date on the sales contract, he said Laukamp had returned to America—perhaps twice—after taking his terminally ill wife back to Germany. "She wasn't dying quite at that moment," he said, explaining why a man he'd previously described as devastated by his wife's diagnosis might have abandoned her on her deathbed. Fritz said he sometimes handled travel arrangements for Laukamp, and might even have records to send me as proof. I never received any.

When I brought up the 1982 Munro letter, Fritz cut me off. "I can't comment on any issues you have with that letter." He said he did not alter it in any way. "I received a photocopy from somebody, and that's the end of the story."

I persisted, going over the evidence point by point. Fritz told me that if the Munro letter was indeed a fake, the forger would have had "no clue" as to what he was doing. He emphatically excluded himself from the clueless category: "I've always known where he lived," he said of Laukamp. But he hadn't noticed any of the problems, including the mistakes in Laukamp's address, before I pointed them out.

I MET WALTER FRITZ in person for the first time on a sunny, windswept Saturday in April, in Sarasota, Florida. After several days of long phone interviews, he'd agreed to have lunch and then be photographed for this magazine. He recommended we meet in St. Armands Circle, a shopping and dining hub popular with tourists, a 45-minute drive from his home.

I was looking over a restaurant's outdoor menu board when Fritz broke through a swarm of tank-topped beachgoers. He had tightly cropped dark hair and wore a beige linen suit with a pocket square, tan wing tips, and aviator sunglasses. Fritz's usual ride is a black Harley-Davidson Road King, he told me. But today he'd come in his Dodge Ram pickup, not wanting to muss his clothes for the camera.

Over lunch, he said he admired King's tenacity: She had held her ground in the face of relentless hostility and skepticism about the papyrus, at no small risk to her reputation. But he felt she'd made a cascade of strategic blunders that had exposed his papyrus to undue scrutiny and animus. Among those missteps, he said, was her sensational title for it; her decision to announce it just steps from the Vatican; and her mention, in her *Harvard Theological Review* article, of the 1982 Munro letter, which—if found "fishy"—could be used to tarnish the papyrus.

"If you know you are going into a confrontation, you just don't provide ammunition to the other side," he explained of his preference for less disclosure. Though King's approach was perhaps "the most honest thing to do, it just wasn't very smart."

Smart for whom?, I wondered. And why was honest the enemy of smart?

As for the porn, Fritz told me that he and his wife (whom he asked me not to name in this article) had at one point drawn about a third of their income from the $24.99 monthly memberships to their Web sites. But they took the sites down a couple of years ago in part because the business had started to take the fun out of the sex. He'd seen the movie adaptation of *The Da Vinci Code*, he said, but there were no links between their "hotwife" fetish, his wife's automatic writing, and the papyrus. "Probably highly coincidental," he said.

Later, his wife told me on the phone that she was clairvoyant and had channeled the voices of angels since she was 17. But she felt no kinship with the Jesus's-wife papyrus or *The Da Vinci Code*'s story, and there was no special reason for the timing of the entries in her book of "universal truths."

"The angels asked me to," she said of her decision to publish it. "I'm here to do God's service. If he wants me to write a book, then I'll write a book."

At one point, Fritz said he needed to disclose something: When he was a 9-year-old boy being raised by a single mother in a small town in southern Germany, a Catholic priest had gotten him drunk on sacramental wine and raped him in a room next to the altar. In April 2010, he wrote a letter about the episode to Pope Benedict XVI, a fellow southern German, whom Fritz felt was doing too little to address the legacy of sexual abuse by members of the clergy. Fritz sent me digital images of consoling letters he said he'd received from three Catholic officials—replies that left him unsatisfied.

Fritz described the effects of the abuse as less spiritual than psychological: his struggles with anger, his combativeness, his contempt for people he saw as intellectually inferior. He said he feared that if he didn't tell me about his letter, someone, perhaps at the Vatican, would leak word of it to insinuate yet another motive for forgery. He insisted that the abuse and the timing of his letter to Benedict—a few months before he contacted King—were unconnected to the papyrus.

I hated to question anyone's account of sexual abuse, but after everything I'd learned about Fritz, I didn't know whether to believe him. A few years earlier, I'd written a long profile of a man who'd been molested by a priest in a small Italian town and later became a hero to the community of abuse survivors. I wondered whether Fritz had read the article and seen an opening to my sympathies—or even to public sympathy. But I discovered that he'd reported the incident long before we met. A Vatican official confirmed that a high-level prelate had written to Fritz "on behalf

of the Holy Father," responding to his "sad story." Church officials in southern Germany said they had a record of Fritz's allegations but knew of no other complaints against the priest, who died in 1980.

One thing did become clear, though. When we first started talking, Fritz had claimed that he had no stake in the papyrus's message. But I began to see that he in fact cared deeply. As a teenager he wanted to become a priest, he said, but he later came to believe that much of Catholic teaching was "bullcrap." Particularly flawed was the Church's claim that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were truer accounts of Jesus's life than the Gnostic Gospels.

He pointed to the fact that almost no papyri bearing the canonical Gospels have been carbon-dated, because such testing would cause physical damage to the New Testament's seminal manuscripts—damage that institutions like the Vatican Library would never countenance. But with the new ink tests at Columbia—the ones King had told me about—scientists can date papyri without damaging them. Fritz said these tests could well show that most of the Gnostic Gospels were written *before* the canonical Gospels, making them better witnesses to the historical Jesus—a view that virtually no serious scholars share.

"All that discussion that the canonical Gospels were way before anything else—that's utter bullshit," Fritz told me. "The Gnostic texts that allow women a discipleship and see Jesus more as a spiritual person and not as a demigod—these texts are probably the more relevant ones."

Fritz had also told me at first that he didn't believe in his wife's spiritual channeling, but later he described her as strangely prophetic about everything from people's motivations to imminent traffic accidents. She's normally a terrible speller, he said, but her automatic writing is almost letter-perfect: "Something must be going on." He said his wife sometimes lapsed, unaccountably, into a language he suspected was Aramaic, the tongue of Jesus. "We tried to record it. It goes on for 20 or 30 seconds."

I asked when he had first heard her speak in this mysterious language.

"During sex," he said.

AFTER THE WAITRESS cleared our lunch plates, Fritz leaned across the table and told me to shut off my tape recorder. I obliged, but continued taking notes. He wanted to keep this next part between the two of us, but I didn't agree, and he went on anyway.

He had a proposition. He had no talent for storytelling, he said, but he possessed the erudition to produce hundreds of pages of background material for a book—a thriller—that he wanted me to write. Instead of doing my own research, which could take years, I should rely on his. "I'd do all the legwork for you, and I wouldn't want anything in return."

The book's subject, he said, would be "the Mary Magdalene story," the "suppression of the female element" in the Church, and the primacy of the Gnostic Gospels, "maybe accumulating to a thriller story in the present."

It sounded an awful lot like *The Da Vinci Code*.

"People don't want to read Karen King's book" on Gnosticism, or the books of other academics, because they're too dense, he said. "People want something they can take to bed. The facts alone, they don't really matter. What matters is entertainment."

The book, he assured me, would be a runaway best seller: "A million copies in the first month or so." Our collaboration, he said, "could really make a big difference." But he insisted on the need for fabrication. "You have to make a lot of stuff up," he said. "You cannot just present facts."

"The truth is not absolute," he explained. "The truth depends on perspectives, surroundings."

I let him go on for a while, but I was stupefied. I was reporting a story about a possible forgery, and the man at its center was asking me to "make a lot of stuff up" for a new project in which he'd be my eager partner. It was a proposal so tone-deaf that either he was clueless, incorrigible—or up to something I couldn't quite yet discern.

I reminded him that I was a journalist; I wrote fact, not fiction. Nor could I accept favors from the subject of a story. But I was curious: What role would the Walter Fritz character play in this hypothetical book, whose underlying ideas, after all, would be entirely his? He gave me a quizzical look. “I wouldn’t have a role in it,” he said.

He wanted, that is, to be the invisible hand.

As I walked back to my car, I realized with something like a shudder that Fritz had hoped to lure me into a trap from which my reputation might never recover. I knew enough about his dealings with King and Laukamp to recognize all the signs: the request for secrecy, the strategic self-effacement, the use of other people for his own enigmatic ends.

Fame and fortune would rain down on me, he’d promised. All I had to do was lower my guard and trust him with all the important details.

Petra Krischok served as an interpreter for this article and contributed reporting from Berlin.