

# Rolling Stone

## Love and Death In the House of Prayer

Tyler Deaton, a self-appointed apostle in one of the fastest-growing evangelical movements, loved Jesus, Harry Potter and, much to his dismay, other men. When his wife turned up dead, the secrets began to spill out

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On October 30th, 2012, at 9:40 p.m., sheriff's deputies responded to a report of a dead body at Longview Lake Picnic Shelter No. 12, in Kansas City, Missouri. A tan Ford Windstar van occupied the far-northwest space of the parking lot. In the van's back seat, deputies found the body of a young woman. A white plastic trash bag had been pulled over her head and tied under her chin. She wore running shoes, black sweatpants, a light-blue fleece and a diamond wedding ring. A pair of eyeglasses had been folded and placed in a cup holder.

### Go Inside 'The Order,' One Mormon Cult's Secret Empire

A handwritten note on the center console acknowledged the evil of suicide and alluded to a terrible choice made long before. Also on the console were two hundred-count bottles of acetaminophen PM, one unopened, the other empty. A photo ID for "Bethany (RN, Menorah Medical Center)" lay on the floorboard. Bethany Deaton was 27 and had recently completed her nursing degree. Her supervisor would later describe her as an excellent, empathetic nurse. On the front seat were several CDs produced by the International House of Prayer, a charismatic Christian movement based in Kansas City and the nearby suburb of Grandview. The adherents of IHOP, as it is generally known, believe that the Second Coming will soon occur and that God needs their help to return Christ to Earth.

Bethany had moved to Grandview nearly four years earlier, after graduating from Southwestern University, a small liberal-arts school in Georgetown, Texas. She had belonged to an IHOP worship group there, and most of the prayer circle's 20 or so members had relocated to Grandview, where they lived in two gender-segregated houses about four miles apart. In August, Bethany had married the worship group's leader, Tyler Deaton. It wasn't clear to people outside the group what would have motivated Bethany to take her own life. For years, she had longed to marry Tyler, and they had envisioned themselves enduring the Tribulation together. But the Jackson County Medical Examiner's Office ruled Bethany's death a suicide, and her body was released to her family for burial in her hometown of Arlington, Texas.

## Sex and Death on the Road to Nirvana

Then, on November 9th, a friend of Bethany's named Micah Moore walked into the Grandview Police Department. "I killed her," he said. He had done so, he claimed, on Tyler's orders. Over the past few months, Moore told a detective, Bethany had been dosed with the anti-psychotic Seroquel, and he and several men in the house had been sexually assaulting her. They had begun to worry that she might tell someone about it. Under questioning by detectives, two of the men in the house, and one who had recently moved out, revealed that they were in ongoing "sexual relationship[s]" with Tyler. At least one of these relationships was "long-term." A fourth said that Tyler had "groomed" him to be part of their sexual group. The men said that Tyler was their "spiritual leader." He was "manipulative" and exercised "control over the members of the household." He characterized the sexual activity as a "religious experience."

Two weeks later, Moore's lawyer recanted on his behalf. Outside the Jackson County Courthouse, she declared his confession "bizarre," "fictional," made by "a distraught and confused young man."

The Jackson County Prosecutor's Office dismissed the recantation and charged Moore with first-degree murder. The judge granted him bail. He will be tried this fall. Tyler cooperated with investigators and has not been charged with a crime. He declined to comment for this story.

In the days following Moore's confession, a parent of one of the worship-group members told a reporter that it was impossible to imagine the events leading to Bethany's death. "How did they fall down that slippery slope?" the parent asked. "How, in just a few years, does all this come to pass?"

## Read Rolling Stone's 2012 Feature on The Hugging Saint

God commanded Tyler Deaton to form a worship group on July 20th, 2007, while he was standing outside a Barnes & Noble, waiting for the midnight release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Tall, handsome, haughty and effeminate, he was about to begin his junior year at Southwestern University. Deaton was taken with fantasy sagas that counterpoised the demonic and angelic – *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings* – but he particularly revered the Harry Potter series, which he called "the greatest story ever written." Although he had been raised in a devout Presbyterian family and remained strongly committed to Christ, he had "willfully practiced magic in junior high," according to a college friend named Boze Herrington, and he occasionally found himself using a "mysterious power to control others in ways that were unexplainable." (The names of all group members other than those already mentioned have been omitted or changed to preserve anonymity.) Seemingly intractable homosexual impulses also vexed his faith. He often felt a sense, he later told a friend, of worthlessness. "I just know that, sociologically, there's a connection between this power-obsessed, dark-magician, evil-dictator thing, and altered sexuality," Deaton told friends.

Deaton was determined to overcome those forces, though. His confidence, monolithic and exclusionary, tended to divide the world into allies and adversaries. He had been a champion debater in high school, and he brought a tirelessness to religious debate at Southwestern. He considered his positions plainly factual and listeners who rejected them ignorant. The caption accompanying his senior portrait from Calallen High School in Corpus Christi, Texas, read, "Be intolerant, because some things are just stupid."

During the summer of 2007, Deaton had traveled to Pakistan as a missionary, where he had a number of "supernatural" experiences. A boy with one leg, he told friends, had miraculously acquired another. During a

visit to a children's home, he had heard the words "The leader of this place is committing sexual sin with young boys." Deaton informed the trip's leaders, and learned that two boys had been caught performing sexual acts with each other. They and the home's leader were removed.

## Take An Inside Look at Scientology In Rolling Stone's 2011 Feature

Since his return, Deaton had been wondering how to access the supernatural in America. The answer came outside the Barnes & Noble. "What you just did in Pakistan," God told him, "you are going to do at Southwestern." The names of three friends "erupted" from Deaton's mouth: "June," "Justin" and "Bethany Leidlein." In Deaton's vision, their collective worship would "shift the spiritual atmosphere" on campus and catalyze a revival. Angels would descend and demons would flee, and Christians across the university would rush to join the group. Even nonbelievers would succumb. The "spirit of intellectualism" that held so many in bondage would be dispelled for good.

Like Deaton, June, Justin and Bethany were observant Christians, enthralled by fantasy fiction and devoted to Harry Potter. The group members began comparing themselves to the four Pevensie children in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, who enter a universe mastered by evil, win renown as soldiers in the army of a resurrected Messiah and finally assume their places as kings and queens of a renewed world. They spent many hours discussing the Harry Potter books and films, which they approached with "a religious devotion," according to Herrington, whom they briefly resisted admitting to the group, because it would have broken the symmetry. The works "fueled our sense of being on a divine mission," says Herrington. "One of their chief attractions was a sense of belonging to a secret club with exclusive access to knowledge and power. That was the root of our whole ideology."

The magic at the heart of the books would always inform his understanding of his own divine power. "In the years I was with him, things were constantly happening that I had to shrug away as being 'the work of the Holy Spirit,'" says Herrington. "Tyler would raise his voice and say, 'Jesus!' and the neighbor's music would immediately stop. He would tell the birds to fly away and they would fly away. He would place curses on my appliances so they wouldn't work."

Bethany was small, fair, blue-eyed, reserved without being remote and from the outset wholly committed to Deaton's mission. In some ways, she made an unlikely follower. A natural intellectual who graduated magna cum laude, she'd read every Charles Dickens novel but one by the time she was 13, and was a talented writer herself, the pride of Southwestern's writing center. She started keeping a blog at the end of 2003, and produced some 200 pages of pointed, wry, sometimes lyric prose. In one post, she described a classmate as a "devastatingly sober playwright." "Oh, liberal arts," she wrote in the summer of 2006. "It's training me to be a splendid gentleman farmer." One evening, she stayed in the writing center after everyone else had left, "trying to cup the moment in my hands," she wrote. "I must often consciously uncrease my forehead, unfurrow my eyebrows and walk a bit more slowly, remembering that tomorrow will take care of itself."

Bethany took care of other people instinctively. "She had a quiet energy that flowed through the group," a classmate recalls. "Her life was one of the most luminous and promising I've known," Herrington says.

She could also be lavishly, almost immoderately romantic. She imagined herself as a novelist and professor at a small university, living in a cottage in the woods. "The dream of her heart was to be married," Herrington recalls. "We used to stay up late talking about it, night after night. She had been praying for her husband since she was a teenager. She had written him letters, before they even met." She found herself "fiercely attracted"

to Deaton and was convinced that God had ordained their union. She was aware of his struggles with homosexuality but believed that God would use her to heal his heart.

**I**n December 2007, at the urging of a cousin, Tyler Deaton attended an IHOP conference in Kansas City. He wrote his fellow group members right afterward: "Friends . . . I kid you not . . . when I say that I feel God has transformed me more in that short period of time than I have been so far in my life. . . . I have one word attached to one phrase that God has violently poured into my heart. It is . . . echoing in the heavens right this instant, and I mean that literally. . . . That word, that phrase . . . is this: REVIVAL through prayer and worship. Friends, I freaking cannot wait to talk to you in person."

At IHOP's frequent, frenetic conferences, attendees learn that they are "in the early days of the generation in which Jesus returns," as IHOP founder Mike Bickle puts it. "I believe that people alive on the Earth today will actually see the Lord with their own eyes," he has preached. But Jesus has no clear return path. Demons, he says, have steadily taken possession of Christian hearts and infiltrated earthly institutions.

In 1983, Bickle says, God instructed him to "establish 24-hour prayer in the spirit of the tabernacle of David." The tabernacle was the tent erected by King David to house the Ark of the Covenant after the conquest of Jerusalem; it became a dwelling place of God and a site of ecstatic worship. To resurrect this spirit of worship, Bickle would build IHOP's first prayer room, a storefront hall next to the Higher Grounds cafe and Forerunner Bookstore in an IHOP-owned strip mall in South Kansas City. Bickle believes that unceasing, euphoric worship and song at IHOP and in prayer rooms across the globe, which should never close or be empty, will promote passionate intimacy with the Lord, revive the church and demolish demonic strongholds. And so IHOPers pray all day and night, through blizzards and blackouts, in hours-long sessions of mesmeric, musical worship, repeating the same phrases over and over, expecting to precipitate the Great Tribulation and the final battle between good and evil that precedes the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

This is IHOP's most alluring tenet: God needs IHOPers to effect the Tribulation and bring Christ back to Earth. "The church causes the Great Tribulation," Bickle has preached. Before founding IHOP, he argued that "God intends us to be like gods. God has conceived in his heart of a plan to make a race of men that would live like gods on Earth." Bickle sometimes affects to know God as he would a peer. "I heard what I call the internal audible voice of the Lord," he has said. He claims that he visited heaven one night at 2:16 a.m., and the Lord charged him with preparing for an End Times ministry and seated him in a golden chariot that lifted off into the empyrean. At IHOP, where prophetic experiences are endemic, the mortal and divine commingle liberally.

The vanguard of God's End Times army, according to Bickle, will be made up of young people, or "forerunners," seers specially attuned to the will of the Lord, "the best of all the generations that have ever been seen on the face of the Earth." For seven years of Tribulation, they will battle the Antichrist. When Christ returns, he will slaughter by sword in a single day the unsaved, and his warriors will rule heaven and Earth forevermore.

IHOP is not the only charismatic movement in America to adopt this theology of aggressive prayer. A constellation of ministries shares its vision. Together, they make up what has been called the New Apostolic Reformation, a decades-old rebellion against traditional Christianity that counts millions of adherents worldwide; it has become such a force in evangelical America that Texas Gov. Rick Perry hosted an NAR prayer rally in Houston for his 2012 presidential campaign. As prayer rooms are established in ever more locations, according to NAR, the "seven mountains of culture" – government, business, family, educational

systems, the media, arts and religion – will fall under its influence.

Within a month of Deaton's return from Kansas City, everyone in the group had become a "hardcore IHOPer," Herrington says. They consumed IHOP books, music and teachings, and road-tripped to NAR conferences. They soaked themselves in IHOP theology until, in Herrington's words, "it became an integral part of who we were."

The work that most enduringly shaped Deaton's thinking might have been *The Final Quest*, an account of the End Times by NAR leader Rick Joyner, whose celestial travels and pretensions to divinity resemble those of Bickle. Joyner claims to have written *The Final Quest* in a "trance" state, akin to that of the Apostle John. Joyner describes his book as "a call to all who will go on to the most noble adventure of the age" – the final showdown between good and evil. *The Final Quest* is ludicrous self-hagiography that casts Joyner as a hero of Armageddon, "one of the saints fighting the last battle."

"Something in Tyler made him particularly volatile when exposed to those teachings," one group member says. Less than three weeks after he read *The Final Quest*, Deaton told his worship group that he had been divinely ordered to "train God's final army." Deaton had arrogated to himself, in Joyner's conception, prodigious supernatural power, highest-level divine revelation and the authority to call down God's judgment upon those who opposed him. The history of the group would play out against a backdrop of *Final Quest* imagery.

Years later, when Herrington tried to reread *The Final Quest*, he started shaking, ran to the bathroom and puked. He doesn't think it's possible to underestimate the influence of the book or of NAR's latter-day apostles on Deaton. "In some ways, Tyler was as much a victim as anyone else," Herrington says. "These apostles destroyed him. I think they drove him mad."

Shortly before Deaton traveled to Kansas City, Bethany encouraged Micah Moore to join the worship group. The two had met in an English class during the fall of 2007. "They hit it off like gangbusters," a mutual friend says. Bethany had always "nourished her friends, and Micah had 'Lost Soul in Need of Nourishment' written all over him."

Earlier in the semester, Moore had dropped acid, and the trip had unbalanced him: He hallucinated legions of angels and demons fighting over his soul, according to a friend. Herrington says Moore was "questioning the nature of reality: 'Am I real? How do I know this isn't all an illusion?'" Moore told one friend that only radical personal change could save him.

Moore was a patient listener, eminently suggestible. A former friend remembers him as "a thoughtful and melancholic young man, going around tugging at his beard and thinking inwardly about things." Other acquaintances have described him as a "space cadet" and so pleasant it was "almost weird, but not in a creepy way." He was an avid guitarist and often played with other musicians on campus. One former classmate thought that he "was looking for magic in life."

The group became a sanctuary for Moore, who often came under "attack" from demons; some members defended him with prayers. "With a community of believers around me, I'm not vulnerable," he told a friend. Moore became as zealous as anyone in the group. He often spoke of the fallen world. "God is so pure and we are so sinful that the only way we can ever go near him is because of Jesus. Without Jesus, God can't even look at us."

"I felt a little shiver of apprehension," she later recalled. "This wasn't a God I had ever heard of."

Moore put his faith in Deaton completely. "He has a special gift," Moore would say. When Deaton laid hands on him, Moore felt "a special grace."

Many prospective members were drawn by this quality of Deaton's. "What we all wanted was an authentic walk with God, and what we saw in Tyler was a kind of vibrancy and conviction, an extreme devotion," one ex-member says. "It was hard not to think, 'What if he is walking with the Lord?'"

At IHOP, it is understood that God has endowed leaders like Bickle with prophetic gifts. But IHOP theology constrains those leaders from imposing limits on the power of their followers. Their insights are no more falsifiable than the leadership's own. "If you were to go up to Mike Bickle and say, 'I feel God's anointed me an End Times apostle,' he'd say, 'Praise God and bless you!'" says a former group member.

When Deaton announced that he had been chosen to train God's final army, thus elevating himself to the spiritual plane of IHOP's senior leadership, no one seriously challenged him. Nearly everyone in the group, according to former members, believed he was an End Times apostle. By the spring of 2008, when the group had grown to about 20, it was assumed that Deaton heard God with unsurpassed clarity and that he had been sent on a spiritual-martial mission that would refashion all existence.

But God spoke to Deaton so often, and about matters so minor, that it sometimes seemed as if the Lord were micromanaging the group. Once, when they were eating at a Panda Express, Deaton sensed a soul-endangering "spot of darkness" on their side of the restaurant, and said they should switch tables. He forbade Herrington from making a late-night fast-food run with two friends because they had "spirits of delusion resting on them."

By the fall of 2008, as Deaton was beginning his final semester, his followers were seeing End Times signs and omens everywhere: in a billboard's exhortation, a clutch of turkey vultures over campus, a stray phrase stuck in someone's head, a small bird in a hawk's talons. Visions came easily; people were "eating prophecies for breakfast," according to a former member. Angels informed the group that fire would rain down on Southwestern and rip the "masks" off unbelievers. Herrington had once dreamed that a flood razed the school and transformed the land into a dwelling place of bizarre marine mammals; the dream now seemed prescient. Forecasts of obliteration occasioned hope, not sadness. Deaton told friends over lunch that death was a sign of weakness and sin, an application of justice. No believer should fear it: A good Christian would not die before his work was done.

One July day in 1988, Mike Bickle was sitting in his office, reading a wedding card inscribed with a verse from the Song of Solomon. "Jesus, seal my heart with your seal of love," Bickle spontaneously prayed. Unaccountably, he began to weep. The phone rang. A prophet had heard the "audible voice of the Lord" for Bickle: The Song of Solomon, a dialogue between King Solomon and his beloved, should become a focus of Bickle's ministry. It eventually came to Bickle that true believers must see Jesus "through the eyes of a bride with loyal, devoted love" – they must "feel loved and in love" with Christ. Without this intimacy in worship, Christ would not return to Earth.

But the Song of Solomon is a paean to sexual desire. "Let the king bring me into his chambers" and "kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," the beloved says. "His fruit" is "sweet to my taste." IHOP's website states that one of its prayer guides, Bridal Intercession, "presents prayer as the joyful and romantic communion between

the lover and his beloved. . . . Readers will find themselves . . . eager to encounter this lovely Lord who is their bridegroom."

Many critics, observing that IHOP recruits post-pubescent youth, have wondered where, if they are to approach their Lord as Solomon's beloved approaches Solomon, their imaginations are supposed to go. "[Jesus] is not coming until the people of God are crying out globally in intercession with a bridal identity," Bickle has preached. If the Second Coming depends upon "romantic communion" with Christ, and the alternative is satanic hegemony, then any error in worship should be made on the side of erotic intimacy – to lust and repent is surely better than abandoning Jesus in his hour of need.

Bickle makes a point of warning his followers that bridal theology is not sexual. To IHOP's detractors, though, the introduction of any suggestion of sensuality into worship invites transgression. Aggravating the libidinal diciness, they argue, is the nature of that worship. IHOPers spend 20, 30 or more hours every week in the prayer room, often for three or four hours at a time.

Across the IHOP complex, in cafeterias, hallways and the prayer room, music composed to enhance the ecstatic experience is "omnipresent," according to an ex-member. Among the lyrics to two popular songs: "God is a lover looking for a lover/So he fashioned me" and "Do you understand what you do to me? . . . How you ravish my heart with just one glance?" Some former IHOPers have talked of being addicted to it – they become nervous and irritable when they turn it off. Another IHOPER has written about addiction to the sedative atmosphere of the prayer room itself: "A common refrain around anxious, discouraged IHOPers is, 'I just gotta get to the prayer room.'"

"Very quickly, there were sensual escapades with God," a former intern says, meaning that some people's private imaginings turned explicit after exposure to IHOP's "bridegroom" Christ. She says that an instructor told her, "God is using his word to kiss you." The intern heard stories of IHOPers fantasizing about having "orgies with Jesus" and "sex with God."

At Southwestern, Deaton often played IHOP music when he presided over worship, and the members referred to Christ as "the bridegroom" and to themselves as his "brides." For most, the worship experience was spiritual, not sensual, but Deaton and at least one other person were "really into the bridegroom stuff," according to an ex-member. Deaton pressed people to enter a prayerful state and "cuddle with Jesus," says an ex-member.

But anything beyond holding hands was judged to be iniquitous. "Marriage prophecies" determined dating partners. According to members, such prophecies were explicitly discouraged by IHOP, but they cropped up in the group not long after IHOP theology sank in. Suddenly, everyone had a prophecy or was the object of one. The recipient would conceal it from its object while sharing it with Deaton and several others, who would pray on it. Deaton seldom matched people romantically interested in one another. It was more often to the unsuited that hesaid, "God told me that you two are destined for marriage."

The practice created a "horrendous atmosphere," says one former member. Deaton involved himself in nearly every relationship. He might find two people he'd matched spiritually unready, and break them up. "You are idolizing your future spouse and putting him before God," he might say. Sometimes people were ordered to avoid one another completely. Flirtation might be punished by a ban on all contact with the opposite sex for a week or more.

Deaton himself did not date, which was taken as a sign of his commitment to God. "He's so focused on the Lord, dating only distracts him," people said. Deaton involuntarily exerted a strong attraction on many of the women in the group. Most liked him at some point, and when he became aware of their feelings, he tended to treat them coldly. As the group grew, maxing out at about 25, knowledge of his homosexuality remained in his inner circle.

Bethany had one of the first marriage prophecies; its object was Deaton. He was not happy. "It'll never happen," he told a friend, although he was unwilling to denounce it outright. He seemed to have fallen for one of the original group members, Justin, several former members say. You could tell by how Deaton looked at him, one acquaintance said, and "in photos, it jumped out at you."

"Bethany cried almost every day" that summer, Herrington says. Unable to get past her feelings for Deaton and still devoted to his mission, she nonetheless returned to Southwestern in the fall of 2008, according to Herrington, "determined not to be weighed down by it." It might take God longer to heal Deaton than she had hoped, and she began thinking about attending nursing school after graduation, instead of following Deaton to IHOP.

In platonic relationships, Deaton urged prolonged, affectionate contact, particularly among men, because, he said, they had been wrongly socialized to resist it. They should hug, cuddle, give one another massages. If you were uncomfortable with loving touch, you had "a wall in your heart" and were "only experiencing part of God's love." "You can't function as a Christian that way," he said. This disconcerted many of the men, but they accepted that spiritual growth might entail discomfort. Deaton might encourage two guys to cuddle on the floor while the rest "dog piled" on top of them, in the words of an ex-member. These were innocent activities for most of the men. Deaton, though, according to Herrington, "spent hours cuddling with Justin on the futon in their dorm." Justin, who was not gay, eventually became uncomfortable with Deaton's affections.

Meanwhile, Deaton took to ministering other gay Christian men, at least one of whom became a group member. Deaton described his own sexual orientation as a "hurt in my heart." One day, he said, two black triangles appeared on his palms. They were "demonic signatures," indicators of homosexuality, visible only to him. In November 2007, the group members spent several hours praying over him. During the intercession, the black triangles disappeared, Deaton said, and he dared to hope that this was "proof of deliverance."

Problematically for Deaton, the social world he had fashioned normalized his own desires while repressing everyone else's. In chapel, Jesus was a "ravishing" bridegroom, a perfect male form; under Deaton's supervision, heterosexual relationships had become unworkable, unmoored from romantic desire and skirted-by Deaton himself with a justification of piety; and he had bound together godliness and homoeroticism. One former group member, thinking about the events of the past fall and the manner of Bethany's death, recently said, "I just don't get it. Why couldn't Tyler be gay? Why couldn't he just go find a guy and be happy?"

**D**eaton always felt that his authority would be released to his followers after he left Southwestern, and as his final semester progressed, group members grew more confrontational with classmates, speaking openly of the Tribulation's proximity and their exclusive knowledge of the "Spirit of God." One day, Micah Moore biked around school, yelling, "I am making war on this campus!" and roaring like a lion," in Herrington's words.

Deaton himself seemed to grow more intolerant. On the way home from a trip to Panda Express, at the end of November, Herrington vehemently contradicted Deaton, and he became so angry he asked to be let out of

the car. The driver turned to Herrington. Deaton was the "apostle of Southwestern," she said, "and you need to do whatever he tells you!" After group members participated in an irreverent campus skit, Deaton told them that they had blasphemed God before nonbelievers and thereby given Satan a "greater foothold on campus." He ordered them to the chapel. Fifteen or 20 people arrayed themselves in a row near the altar to pray and repent; several were crying.

One day, Deaton played Bethany a song from *High School Musical 3* called "I Want It All": "Imagine having everything we ever dreamed – don't you want it?" A few weeks later, according to Herrington, "she sat him down and very forcefully explained her feelings. He claimed he was overwhelmed by the radiant purity of her love and his prophetic discernment was unable to find anything worrying or unholy about it. His heart was opened by her tenderness." Bethany began to lean toward IHOP.

In November, Moore reported that God had talked to him while he was praying in the shower: A tragedy would soon befall Southwestern. Only true believers who stood on a "firm foundation" would remain at peace. A few days after Moore described this vision to the group, four other members shared confirming visions or insights. "It sounds like someone is going to die," one member said. Herrington predicted that the tragedy would occur on December 4th or 5th.

On December 3rd, a series of "spectacular omens" culminated in the appearance of an immense dark cloud over Highway 29, which borders the Southwestern campus. The group convened in Deaton's room. "There was a deep feeling shared by everyone present that God was about to descend on Southwestern in glory and judgment and . . . destroy these things that were against him," Herrington says.

The next day, a student named Rob Atkinson was crossing the stretch of Highway 29 earlier darkened by the premonitory cloud when he was hit by a car and killed. Atkinson had been a vocal supporter of interfaith dialogues, which Deaton considered harbingers of the Antichrist. "We were convinced that God had come down in wrath, and that our prayers had led to this student's death," Herrington later wrote to a friend. Several others concurred.

The worship-group members believed they had blood on their hands, and it exalted them. "We talked about Rob in a tone of gleeful triumphalism," Herrington says. Other ex-members ruefully agree. In Atkinson's death, according to Herrington, Deaton detected a "blueprint" for the future: After studying at IHOP, he would assemble an apostolic team, travel to Egypt and establish a ministry. God's wrath, unleashed by the prayers of his team, would destroy all unholy things, just as it had destroyed Atkinson. Members of the worship group began hearing from God: Their mission in life was to follow Deaton.

**I**n early 2009, Deaton and Bethany moved to Grandview, Missouri, to begin IHOP's six-month "One Thing" internship program, devised by the leadership for "a generation who, in loving obedience, will abandon themselves to Jesus," and thus become "equip[ped] spiritually" for "a life of prayer."

Over the next two years, most of the other group members would graduate and join Deaton and Bethany in Grandview. (Moore, a couple of years younger than Deaton and Bethany, would not arrive until the summer of 2011.) From 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Deaton and Bethany absorbed biblical analysis and theology, and from 6 p.m. until midnight, they worshipped in the prayer room.

It wasn't long before Deaton had a transformative revelation. Up until then, he had seen his homosexuality as simply the way he was wired, but in a moment of divine insight, it came to him that being gay was a choice he

had made, whether consciously or not. He later described this moment, and the interior anguish preceding it, in an essay titled "Good News in Why Homosexuality Is a Sin: An Answer That Makes It Conquerable and Non-Unique": "Oh, I can tell you [God's abhorrence] is so painful to the homosexual that struggles because this is what homosexuals feel – 'Why is my love condemned? . . . Just because God says no without giving any explanation, why? This is so cruel, so senseless, so unfair. I can't even imagine liking heterosexuality; it's disgusting, even though I want to be like that so badly, but how can I change? What's even wrong with this, God?'"

The "hopelessness" and "self-pity" in those lines was "sinful in and of itself," Deaton wrote. But the church offered little help beyond the blunt reminder that homosexuality is "not in line with God's established natural order." "When I heard someone callously say, 'Why don't they just not be gay?' rage would course through my being at the ignorance and insensitivity to the struggle that homosexuals try to endure, the intensity with which they always try to not be gay at least at first," he continued. Ten years of fruitlessly praying for intervention had made him bitter and hurt and had ultimately removed hope from "deep regions of my heart."

But then came the revelation. It was 2 a.m. He was "wrestling with God. . . . I felt like some lesser creature, a half-man, a half-human. . . ." For reasons having largely to do with childhood trauma, he explained, he had always sought self-worth in other men, and he saw now that this seeking was classically idolatrous. In Romans 1:25–27, he noted, Paul identifies idolatry as the cause of homosexuality: "They worshipped and served [created things] rather than the Creator . . . [and] for this reason . . . men were consumed with passion for one another." For the first time, he repented of the idolatry driving his desires. "The joy that surged through me on that night and in the immediate days [afterward] is difficult to explain," he wrote.

A few weeks later, Deaton was sitting in the prayer room, watching Bethany worship. A "giant vat of affection," as he later described it, rushed over him. "I was experiencing real, passionate, sexual, knock-me-off-my-feet, pure and glorious attractions for the most beautiful woman alive," Deaton wrote in the essay. When they completed their internships, Deaton asked her out. In the summer of 2009, he took her for a walk and announced that he intended to pursue her "unto marriage."

"It's hard to overstate the exhilaration she felt," Herrington says. "By the time she left Southwestern, her one dream was to be married to Tyler. Tyler was going to be cured, they were going to get married and have a son named Samuel."

Later that summer, more group members moved to Grandview, and the men and women settled into their respective houses. Whatever passions Deaton's epiphany might have released, his relationship with Bethany appeared staged to some members of the group. They went on a date every Tuesday between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m., and spent Friday evenings baking bread together. Anything more, Deaton said, would mean subordinating the needs of the group to their own needs. He discouraged Bethany from physical displays of affection. They would not kiss until their engagement, two and a half years later. About a year after they began formally dating, Deaton convened the core group members for a "leader's conference." They took turns describing their visions of the future. When it was Bethany's turn, she got "really scared," Herrington says. She turned to Deaton and said, "Sometimes all I want to do is live in a house with you, and a baby, and maybe some chickens!" Deaton called her "selfish" and told her to stop elevating her own desires over those of the "community." "You need to put away your personal longings and connect with the goals of this movement," he said.

"I'm sorry for being selfish and idolizing Tyler," she said.

Tyler Deaton's sway only increased in the sphere of IHOP. "His hand could be felt in everything," a former member says. "Even if he didn't directly say to do something, his influence was in almost every aspect of our lives." Deaton was a canny delegator, and he or his appointees drew up meal charts and worship schedules and assigned chores and roommates. If he perceived parents to be thwarting "God's will for their children," he urged his followers to reduce contact with them. Many cut their families off completely for periods of time. In early 2010, Deaton told the members of the inner circle that God wanted him to quit working as a part-time math tutor and devote himself completely to his ministry. They would need to pool their meager earnings to support him.

In college, they had looked ahead to careers in law, art, medicine, literature, finance, education. Some had started applying to grad school. But the Great Tribulation was impinging on the present, and Deaton's End Times mission trivialized everything else. To support themselves and Deaton, group members delivered pizzas and sold makeup and paint. Exceptionally, Bethany entered an accelerated nursing program in 2011, but she and everyone else spent much of their time in the prayer room, worshipping at home with Deaton, or studying the Bible and IHOP doctrine, gazes fixed on the next world. "They became shells of themselves," says a member of the Southwestern group who did not make the move. "Once you went to Kansas City, you didn't leave," says another.

Once a week, the men and women held "accountability" meetings in their respective houses, reviewing the dynamics within the group and searching out sin. When men shared feelings of desire toward the women, Deaton might embarrass them by unilaterally informing the women. Even as Deaton strategically strained relationships, he condemned noncommunal activities as "un-relational." "If we noticed a lack of heterosexual love occurring within the group, that was 'OK' because, Tyler reminded us, Jesus said people 'neither marry nor are married in heaven,'" a former member recalls.

In the fall of 2010, Deaton ordered Herrington shunned for eight months. Among his stated misdeeds: judgmentalism, self-isolation via creativity, and unwillingness to reform himself. Herrington had been one of the group's most obdurate skeptics, and after Deaton's revelation about his sexuality, he had acidly suggested to Deaton that he "might not be as cured of homosexuality as he thought he was." Herrington was not asked to move out; instead, members simply stopped interacting with him.

Word of the shunning reached IHOP's leaders in May 2011. They had not known of Deaton's grip over the residents of the two houses, and they were not pleased. (In a statement, IHOP has said that "Mr. Deaton led his religious group entirely independently" from the organization.) Over the summer, a leader spoke with Deaton, and Herrington was officially welcomed back. The first ritual of his reinstatement, after roughly eight months of phantasmal existence in his own home, was a celebratory dinner at the women's house. One by one, each member stepped forward and hugged him. June, dressed in a long orange gown, presented him with a blue robe and sash. After dinner, a few people performed scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. At the end of the evening, Deaton asked him how he felt about the celebration. "It was very well orchestrated," Herrington said.

"Boze, some day you're going to realize what an incredible thing was just done for you," Deaton said.

That summer, Deaton began preparing the group for the End Times. They stockpiled a month's supply of food in the women's house and met twice a week with a guy who was reputedly a former soldier to practice dodging imaginary bullets, wrestling weapons from enemy soldiers and executing combat rolls by leaping from playground slide platforms and monkey bars. The training would pay off when the Antichrist upended

existence. Deaton also told them that if they made it to the Middle East first, they would be able to fend off Muslim extremists.

Toward the end of the summer, in anticipation of Moore's arrival, Deaton changed the room assignments in the men's house. According to Herrington, a group member named Evan, whom Deaton had promised to liberate from a homosexual lifestyle, would room with Moore. Justin would share Deaton's basement room, which Deaton had assigned himself because of its privacy and potential to double as a "ministry room." "Tyler was full of paradigms that summer," Herrington says. Healthy heterosexual intimacy, Deaton posited, depended on prior comfort with same-sex intimacy. Rooming with Justin would allow him to "experience what it's like to be intimate with a guy in preparation for being intimate with Bethany."

Another member later told detectives that after he'd arrived in Grandview, Deaton had slipped into his room while he was in bed, laid down beside him and held him. He said that he later realized Deaton was priming him for sexual intimacy. One morning that summer, as the group was getting ready to go on a hiking trip, Herrington says he asked Deaton why he looked so tired. Deaton confided that he'd only gotten 20 minutes of sleep the night before because he'd had an extended "therapy session" with Evan. They had engaged in a kind of spiritual "wrestling" – "lying together in Tyler's bed all night in a largely undressed state," in Herrington's words – that resulted in "massive healing" for Evan and a "massive breakthrough in his masculinity." Deaton's relationship with Bethany remained as it was: a weekly three-hour school-night date and bread baking on Fridays.

Micah Moore's route to Grandview was circuitous. At the end of 2008, after seeming to fortell, and then will, the death of Rob Atkinson, Moore was home for Christmas break when he had a "massive freakout," screaming that demons were attached to his head. Moore's mother apparently blamed her son's collapse on the worship group's demonology. Moore didn't return to school that spring, transferring to the University of Texas.

One afternoon at the end of Moore's junior year, Deaton called. "Are you really happy? Are you really satisfied?" he asked.

"Tyler touched that place in Micah that longed for something deeper than just playing music and moving through a succession of girlfriends," says Herrington. "Micah wanted to do something important, and Tyler intuitively understood that." Moore decided to return to Southwestern for his senior year. Deaton and several other group members drove down from IHOP to welcome him back. He had appointed Moore one of the leaders of the worship group before his breakdown, and now reinstated him. Deaton insisted that the group receive Moore lovingly. "I think Micah really felt indebted to him for that," a friend says.

A year later, when Moore moved into the men's house in Grandview, "things got crazy," says Herrington. The Holy Spirit continually overpowered the worshippers, knocking them down and inspiring tongues. Moore was on his knees, yelling and experiencing head convulsions, and he "shook all the time," says Herrington. One night during worship, the Spirit descended with unusual strength. Everyone was "screaming and rolling around and writhing like the demons in *Pandemonium*," he says. After the worship, Deaton informed Herrington that his "immunity to the movement of the Holy Spirit" evidenced a hardened heart. Deaton had readmitted Herrington to the group partly to pacify IHOP authorities, according to an ex-member; now that Deaton suspected regression, he could no longer afford to operate within IHOP strictures.

There followed, Herrington says, a series of "bizarre punishments and psychological mind games," what

Deaton called "behavior modification." First, they renamed him "Bobby" and confiscated his glasses. They outlawed the sweaters and dress slacks he usually wore; his outfits were "un-relational," Deaton told him. He took Herrington to Old Navy and American Eagle Outfitters, where Deaton picked out his new wardrobe: khakis, polos, cargo shorts, short-sleeve buttondown shirts.

Soon afterward, Deaton assembled the group and told Herrington to go sit on the front steps. According to another group member, Deaton shared what God had revealed to him: Herrington was an inveterate lech with a cross-dressing fetish; he had been stealing June's clothes. Someone came outside and told him to remove his unauthorized sweater, a symbol of unwholesome self-isolation.

Herrington was now made to eat his meals on the floor and was rarely allowed to speak. Deaton created the "Bobby discipline team," which consisted of Moore and three other men. "Bobby has abused me so much, I just can't deal with it anymore," Deaton said. "It's time y'all found out what this feels like."

Herrington's jailers escorted him nearly everywhere, preventing all interactions. Herrington often stayed in his room during worship night. On two occasions, he says, a woman stood up and testified that an attacking spirit was drawing near. After praying together, the group agreed that Herrington was sending demons against them. One night, a woman prophesied that God was going to punish "those who have hurt you." For the first time, Herrington later thought, the group must have been calling on God to destroy one of its own. Four months later, he was formally excommunicated.

**B**ethany Leidlein and Tyler Deaton were married in August 2012. During the procession, Deaton sang "Come to Me, My Beloved." They held a worship service at the altar. Bethany seemed "resolved" and "serene," in the words of a friend. Some in attendance, though, were uneasy, spooked by Deaton's evident power over her. Several of Bethany's old friends felt a "deep sense" that they were bidding her a final goodbye.

Deaton and Bethany spent most of their three-week honeymoon in Costa Rica. Deaton had mischievously kept the destination from Bethany until they were on their way to the airport. That may have been the final romantic flourish of the relationship. In an e-mail to one of her roommates, Bethany described a difficult situation. "It makes me scared to get married," her roommate told the other women in the house. In a statement to detectives, one of Deaton's roommates said Deaton "confided" to the other men that he was "frustrated after his recent marriage [because] he couldn't get an erection."

Some of Bethany's roommates in the women's house noticed a change in her as soon as she got back from her honeymoon. She was "confused" and "uneasy." She'd moved into Deaton's basement room in the men's house, but within two weeks began spending one or more nights a week at the women's house. Sometimes she stayed several nights in a row. "I just need a little space," she'd say, or, "I just feel too controlled." But she wouldn't elaborate. No one had ever seen her so listless and depressed. She could not be consoled.

Deaton, and therefore the group, considered Bethany's distress to be her own problem. She was exhibiting inappropriate "resistance" to her new husband. She was restless at night, a former roommate says, which bruised his prophetic sensibility and cost him sleep. Since Bethany couldn't bring herself to blame him, she instead blamed some amorphous sinfulness in herself. Worried that she might be inclined toward repression and avoidance, Deaton instructed her to meet with Moore in the mornings so that Moore could ensure she was facing her problems.

During this time, according to the statements Deaton's roommates made to detectives, Deaton was pursuing "sexual relationships" with three of the men in the group. Moore recently told someone close to him that he too had been sexually involved with Deaton. "It was a skillfully orchestrated system of debauchery that shattered the wills of the boys under Tyler's care and crushed their spirits," says Herrington.

As the weeks passed, it seemed to one of Bethany's former roommates in the women's house that she was "running from the men's house, and then shrinking back." When her mood did not change, Deaton announced that he had done all he could to show her that God loved her, and now the group should try to defuse her self-criticism by ignoring it. He "came across as very logical, thoughtful and biblically grounded," according to a former member, but his edict left Bethany profoundly isolated.

According to Moore's confession, the drugging and sexual assaults began not long after Bethany returned from Costa Rica. Moore did not implicate Deaton in the assaults, but if they did happen, multiple ex-group members say, they could not have occurred without his blessing. By then, Deaton could blast anything, no matter how grotesque, with transfiguring grace, and it would appear holy. Certain details in the confession suggest that the men may have understood the assaults described to be religious acts: Moore said the men used his iPad to film and write poems about them.

Moore stated that before he killed Bethany, she had been given a bottle of Seroquel water. At Longview Lake, he said he pulled a white plastic trash bag over her head and held it in place until her body shook. The statement of probable cause noted that the bag appeared to be "inhaled into the mouth of the deceased." Moore said he then informed Deaton of the crime.

Soon after Bethany died, the group members assembled at the women's house. Moore led a service. He was "laughing and looking happy, as he always did when he was leading worship and playing guitar," a former member says. He seemed "relieved."

"Stay upbeat and press into the Lord, because this community is bigger than one person," Deaton told the group. When Herrington heard about this, he thought of an evening soon after Bethany and Deaton finished their IHOP internships. The group went to see the premiere of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, in which a beloved, deeply good character dies. "God spoke to me during the end of the movie and said, 'This is how it's going to be when you lose someone,'" Deaton said afterward. "You can't just hold on to them, you have to keep moving."

Three days after Bethany's body was discovered, one of the men in the house told detectives, Deaton told him about a disturbing dream. He said he had dreamed of suffocating Bethany to death.

Right away, some of Bethany's friends and family members thought her suicide note was fabricated. Its defeatism was antithetical to her spirit, and it was ineptly composed. "Someone who wrote so beautifully couldn't have written something that inarticulate," one friend said.

"My name is Bethany Deaton," the note read. "I chose this evil thing. I did it because I wouldn't be a real person and what is the point of living if it is too late for that? I wish I had chosen differently a long time ago. I knew it all and refused to listen. Maybe Jesus will still save me."

Many of the former group members believe Moore's confession and dismiss his recantation: The confession was spontaneous, made days after her death was ruled a suicide, and it precisely captured the dynamic

between Deaton and Moore. After Deaton instructed him to kill Bethany, Moore said, Deaton added that he knew he had it in him to do it.

"That's exactly what Tyler says when he wants you to do something really big," says one former member. "He said that to me – he said that to everyone at some point."

Surprisingly, some members express little anger at Moore, but Deaton's freedom seems to appall everyone. When another ex-member heard that Bethany's death might not have been a suicide, she says that "my first thought was, 'Tyler did it.' He is one of the few people I've ever met who genuinely frightened me. He just didn't care. He saw people as people only insofar as he could control them."

Within weeks of Moore's confession, the group disintegrated. Both rental houses sat empty. Parents had driven to Grandview to collect their kids or bought them plane tickets home. The women, who had known nothing about the activities in the men's house, were in deep shock. Many members have fallen out of touch with each other. Some have returned to the professional ambitions they put aside when they followed Deaton to Grandview.

In the year since Bethany's death, Tyler Deaton has kept a low profile and not spoken publicly. "Even today, he admits to nothing and shows no true remorse," a former member says. He apparently still believes in the righteousness of the worship group and has repeatedly tried to contact former followers. He e-mailed a woman he'd condemned, hoping to renew a friendship; he told another, whose wife he'd declared a reprobate, that he wished things could just go back to "normal"; and he e-mailed Herrington to say that things were not what they seemed, and he hoped they could be friends again.

Last February, Deaton successfully applied to teach pre-calculus at a high school south of Dallas. He apparently threw himself into the job. According to one parent, all the kids liked him. Then a few of his students Googled him and learned about the events in Grandview. He was placed on leave. Several former group members believe that he is now living in Corpus Christi with his family.

**B**ethany's family held a memorial service for her a week after she died, at a funeral home on a hillside overlooking Longview Lake. Her body had been found across the water. Some of the group members were clearly grieving, but some seemed unaffected. They stood and offered remembrances with a merry serenity. "There was a weird feeling that something was wrong, that something was just off, and it all goes back to the fact that Tyler wasn't moved at all," one says.

"As some of you know already, I am a man who is in love with ideas, with crazy paradigms!" he said when he stood to speak, and laughed. "And when they brought me Bethany's body, at first I cried. But then I laughed, because I said to her, 'Bethany, if you could see you, you would not like the way you look right now!'"

"And last night, we had worship time together, very briefly, as a group, and it was wonderful and it just showed me the Lord's supremacy over this wretched thing that is death," he said. "And I thought to myself, 'What a crazy paradigm!'" He paused. "And then I thought, 'Bethany would love my paradigm, because she loved me and was so fiercely supportive, and believed me hundreds of times when I thought I was crazy or heretical.'"

He paused again, for an uncomfortably long time. Bethany loved to spend time in the water, Deaton said. She loved small animals, like birds and squirrels. He sat down.

Watching Deaton and his followers, Herrington tried to imagine how they conceived of Bethany's death. "They had somehow evaded the brokenness that should have accompanied such a devastating event," he wrote in his journal the next day. "They were still chosen, still special, still invulnerable to the arbitrary whims of mortality. They'd gone so deep into the Great Tribulation, reality no longer had the power to harm them."

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<http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/love-and-death-in-the-house-of-prayer-20140121>