

Death By Botany
Exerpt pages 1-6

an original screenplay by

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Begin on forest and nature noises.

NARRATOR

Illness, insanity, death. The result of seemingly innocuous plants. Plants like Hydrangeas, Mountain Laurel, and Spotted Parsley which can all be used to decorate your house and may even encroach on your land naturally. Even a simple apple seed can hide a dangerous secret. Did you know that they possess naturally occurring arsenic? Or that castor oil is made from a bean that is known as one of the most deadly on the planet? Or, perhaps, that a bush known for being so painful, those that come in contact with it become a suicide risk. We start at the smallest killer.

There's a pause from narration and noises of a village are heard.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

A fungus. Pont St. Esprit is a village in France where in 1951, madness gripped the community, leading to 7 deaths and many, many more injuries.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

The first afflicted become depressed or agitated. They suffered irregular heart patterns and further hysteria... One villager is convinced he is dead, that his head is made of copper and his intestines are crawling with snakes.

There's an echoing scream.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Another thinks he can fly, shouts, "I'm an airplane!" And jumps out of a window. Despite having broken his bones, he still keeps running, apparently unaware of the pain. There are many more stories like this of people being chased by invisible animals or demons...

Roars echo.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

..Of seeing loved ones that have been dead for years. Even a mother turns against her son in a fit of rage, strangling him. Those that are affected are thrown into a mental institution but the damage has already been done. Speculation arises. How could a quaint village in the relatively modern year of 1951 be stripped of all humanity so quickly? In 48 hours, lives are changed and ruined. What could be the cause? The leading theory is the fungus called *Aspergillus Fumigatus* but to this day there is still question about what happened. Was it the CIA testing LSD on its allies? Was it aliens? Possibly. Go to any conspiracy website and you'll find a great deal of people claiming any number of things with "irrefutable," proof. Dr. Peter LoPresti explains why LSD seems to be on the short-list of these theories.

LOPRESTI

So the case of the French town being poisoned by the fungal infection of the brain is particularly interesting because it supposedly produced the chemical in the class of the ergot which are alkaloids that can affect a whole bunch of different body functions, including give you hallucinations. And one of the other chemicals that these fungi can produce is actually lysergic acid derivatives. In other words, a plant derived LSD like compounds.

Someone flips through papers.

NARRATOR

What proof is there of such a wild theory? Is it really so wild?

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

One piece of evidence is that there was revealed a CIA document which was labeled, "Re: Pont-Saint-Esprit and F.Olson Files.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

SO Span/France Operation file, inclusive Olson. Intel files. Hand carry to Belin - tell him to see to it that these are buried." After all, the CIA experimented on their own people. What makes us think that they wouldn't do the same to America's allies? However, these files are nowhere to be found.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Aspergillus Fumigatus seems to be the least sensational and most likely cause of this city-wide outbreak. Poisoning in this way is called ergotism, as Dr. LoPresti states earlier, but is this theory viable? Is it just a cover up for another conspiracy? According to Dr. Barrueto, A Toxicologist, this isn't the first time this has happened.

BARRUETO

What is Aspergillus and rye is essentially has occurred in, in other places as well as that French village and I believe had an incident here in the United States as well. It's centered around ergotism. There is a toxin that's produced by this fungus that is contained in silos. And this became a known phenomenon.

NARRATOR

If not that, then what? Does something else stick out as the cause?

BARRUETO

So I know that there's other theories, mercury poisoning and some other toxin, but I think most people with the symptoms that are just say that ergotism is the primary consideration.

NARRATOR

On top of all of this, there is one big wrinkle in the widely held belief that this was ergot poisoning. One professor, Steven Kaplan, claims that the fungus would not have been able to withstand the heat of the oven and neither would LSD.

BARRUETO

I think it could survive the cooking process.

NARRATOR

So where does that leave us? Either way, we continue to be enthralled and fascinated by this tragic accent-- or government conspiracy.

Spooky music plays.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

It's likely that the reason this story is so frequently discussed by conspiracy theorists is not what happened but *when* it happened. These cases of hysteria through fungus have occurred in the past in France during the dark ages when the sciences of food quality wasn't as well known and the technology of preservation wasn't available. Before knowing the date, it's easy for one to assume it happened in the, "Olden days." For that reason, the explanation of fungus is too simple for many. Maybe it was aliens, after all.

There's spooky alien noises.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

From government conspiracies to conspiracies against the government. Next is the mysterious death of Emperor Claudius of Rome. Was he the victim of the first female serial killer or a very ill timed medical emergency?

Commercial break.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

While the previous story was an unfortunate accident, this one is cold blooded murder. The story of Nero is a legendary now. He cut a man's penis off to make him his, "Wife."

A scissor snipping noise on top of quiet music and choking.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

He forced his people to listen to his music even during medical emergencies and on top of everything, he constantly tried to have his mother killed. But was it really his fault? He was just doing what he learned from her. Nero's mother, Agrippina, likely had Claudius murdered so that her son could rule. It seems that Nero got his flare for the dramatics from his mother as she is said to have hired the first female serial killer, Locusta to do the deed. And she sure was thorough.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Not only did she use mushrooms to poison Claudius, but she went the extra mile and added strychnine and paint thinner to a feather that was used to induce vomiting. This sealed Claudius's fate and he was pronounced dead within hours. But could this have happened so quickly? In recent years, historians had declared that he was surely killed by death cap mushrooms which makes sense... To an extent. If the stories are to be believed, he was given a plate of mushrooms and mixed in were the poisonous death caps that looked near identical to the edible ones. Dr. Peter LoPresti confirms that it would be remarkably easy to mistake death caps for edible mushrooms.

LOPRESTI

The death cap mushroom is dangerous because it can look like other edible mushrooms. So you have to be a very, very good forager to get the right mushrooms

NARRATOR

But he has a bigger concern.

LOPRESTI

I would say the reports of him dying quickly afterwards are unreasonable. It takes, it'll take a couple of days. You start with some colicky abdominal pain, then you go on to diarrhea, lots of fluid loss if you

(MORE)

LOPRESTI (CONT'D)

eat enough. Then your organs system start to shut down, including your, your liver and your kidneys. That's a day's long process. That's not hours. Certainly.

NARRATOR

Dr. Barrueto agrees.

BARRUETO

It's actually ironic, but if you puke faster, so within the first six hours, probably not a poisonous mushroom, it's the delayed vomiting that we actually have concerns in those particular patients. I would even extend the time. If the patient died within the first 3 days, it probably was not death cap mushrooms.

NARRATOR

Claudius likely died incredibly quickly. This doesn't match the symptoms of death cap poisoning as Dr. LoPresti explains. On top of that, how would they be so quick to induce vomiting if no one knew not all mushrooms were edible. It seems like the feather was the real killer.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

And if that's the case, what if Locusta wasn't the only one employed by Agrippina. Would you put it past her to also bribe the physician who used the feather in the first place? No matter if there were two conspirators or one, the end result didn't change. Claudius is dead and Locusta was likely the culprit.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

So what happened? Was she imprisoned? Executed? Or did she escape? Nero, now the new Emperor of Rome, pardoned her. Not only did he pardon her for past crimes but he also gave her a carpet pardon for any future crimes she may commit. It was only once Nero's reign ended that she faced punishment for her actions.