Episode Book

EPISODE #5977

Spy Codenames, Dead Drops, and the Phrases That Fooled Everyone

PUBLISHED	14 October 2026 at 21:49 UTC
DURATION	24:40
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/spy-codenames-recognition-phrases-48176/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.4
SOURCES	12 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:42 UTC

SYNOPSIS

What did Russian illegals actually say to each other? In June 2010, the DOJ unsealed a complaint that put real recognition phrases into the public record — "Excuse me, but haven't we met in California last summer?" — and the answers came back with corrections, as if two colleagues were arguing about a shared memory. This episode sorts four different machines that get constantly confused: agent codenames, operation names, recognition phrases, and physical signals like a folded newspaper in an Arlington park. It traces the CIA's two-letter digraph system (AMTHUG, AMQUACK), the Stasi's strange tradition of letting informants name themselves (Figaro, Ramses, Mikrobe), and Markus Wolf's three-card-index compartmentalisation that made the names almost irrelevant. And it confronts the twist: the New York Times reported that some of the 2010 phrases were supplied by an undercover FBI agent, meaning the best-documented example of spy tradecraft is partly counterintelligence theatre.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Dom Joly, trench coat, London Underground, turns to a stranger and asks about the weather in Leningrad.



Herman

And the stranger has no idea he's just been recruited.



Corn

Daniel's got a soft spot for that sketch. Trigger Happy TV, the recurring KGB spy bit, the one where Joly approaches some unsuspecting commuter with a recognition phrase, gets a blank look, and then apologises for the mix-up and walks off.



Herman

Which, on the face of it, is pure comedy.



Corn

Except Daniel's noticed something. In 2010 the FBI rolled up a network of Russian illegals in the States, and the court papers recorded the actual recognition phrases they were using. Questions about whether two people had previously met in California, or Beijing. And the whole thing reads like the sketch.



Herman

Life imitating bad fiction.



Corn

So he wants the strange stuff. The documented code words, countersigns, challenge-and-response phrases, operational names, dead drop signals, from the CIA, MI6, the Stasi, the Russian services, across the whole span. Real phrases from declassified archives and espionage trials, not folklore. And underneath all of that, the real



Corn (continued)

question. Why would a service deliberately pick something that sounds absurd? Is the ridiculousness ever actually useful, or is good tradecraft supposed to sound like nothing at all?



Herman

And how much of the Cold War spy encounter we all picture is just fiction feeding back into itself.



Corn

Right. He also wants the categories kept straight. An agent's codename is not an operation's codename, and neither of those is a recognition phrase, and none of those is a dead drop signal.



Herman

Four different machines. Let's take them one at a time.



Corn

Start with the simplest. An agent codename is a label for a person. The CIA's system uses a two-letter digraph for the geographic or functional area, then an arbitrary word bolted on. Fidel Castro was AMTHUG. Che Guevara was AMQUACK.



Herman

AMTHUG. Somebody in that office had a sense of humour and nobody stopped them.



Corn

An operation name is the label for a campaign. MONGOOSE was the Cuba programme. PBSUCCESS was Guatemala. And then the recognition phrase is a spoken password exchanged between two people who are pretending to know each other. That's the Joly bit.



Herman

And the fourth category is the signal, which is a physical object doing the talking. In the 2010 case, five thousand dollars in an envelope inside a folded newspaper, left in a park in Arlington for Mikhail Semenko to collect.



Corn

That's the anchor, then. Ghost Stories. Ten illegals arrested at the end of June 2010, and the DOJ complaint unsealed on the twenty-ninth put the recognition phrases into the public record word for word. We can read them.



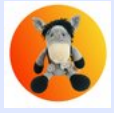
Herman

We can. And they are extraordinary. But here's the tension the whole episode runs on. The operational ideal for a recognition phrase is language so dull it disappears into any conversation happening nearby. Yet services keep choosing names that come close to the nerve. And sometimes the absurdity is deliberate theatre.



Corn

Which of those is the 2010 case?



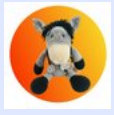
Herman

That's the twist, and we'll get to it. First, the phrases.



Corn

The phrases.



Herman

Anna Chapman. The approach line she was meant to receive was, "Excuse me, but haven't we met in California last summer?" And her reply was, "No, I think it was the Hamptons."



Corn

The Hamptons.



Herman

It's a correction. She's not just accepting the recognition, she's quibbling with the location, the way you would if a colleague had misremembered a party. It's actually clever construction.



Corn

It's a woman who's been told to sound like she's been to a party, and the party is in the Hamptons.



Herman

There's a second one that's even better because it happened on a phone. On the twenty-sixth of June 2010, an undercover agent calls Mikhail Semenko and says, "Could we have met in Beijing in two thousand four?" And Semenko comes back with, "Yes, we might have, but I believe it was in Harbin."



Corn

He corrects the city.



Herman

Beijing to Harbin. That's not a man rattled by a strange question, that's a man who's decided the memory is real and merely misplaced.



Corn

Except who was on the other end of that call?



Herman

That's the twist. Hold it.



Corn

There's a third phrase in the papers. "Excuse me, did we meet in Bangkok in April last year?" And the answer comes back, "I don't know about April, but I was in Thailand in May of that year."



Herman

Again, the correction is the tell. Every one of these is built on a disputed detail. The phrase isn't a password, it's the opening of an argument about a shared memory that neither person is supposed to have actually had.



Corn

And a fourth one, Richard Murphy, who was meant to recognise an SVR agent in Rome. His line was, "Excuse me, could we have met in Malta in nineteen ninety-nine?"



Herman

While looking for a contact holding a copy of Time magazine. That's the whole encounter. A man, a magazine, and a question about Malta.



Corn

Time magazine. Why not just wear a hat?



Herman

Because a magazine is deniable. If nothing happens, you're a man on a bench with a magazine. If everything goes right, you're a man on a bench with a magazine who's just been recognised. The magazine is doing the work the phrase can't.



Corn

So the phrase is the second layer.



Herman

The phrase is the confirmation. The magazine gets you to the right person. The phrase proves you're the right person.



Corn

Now the twist.



Herman

The New York Times reported on the thirtieth of June 2010 that some of the taught lines apparently came from an undercover FBI agent. The Bureau supplied them.



Corn

So the Russians were being handed their own recognition phrases by the people investigating them.



Herman

That's the single most important corrective to the idea that spies really talk like this. Some of the absurdity in the 2010 case isn't SVR tradecraft at all, it's counterintelligence theatre. The FBI wrote lines that sounded like spy lines, possibly because they wanted the case to read a certain way, possibly because they were testing whether the targets would accept anything. We don't know the motive. But the phrases went into the complaint, and now they're what everybody quotes as evidence of how Russians operate.

Corn

Which means the best-documented example of real recognition phrases is partly a performance for an audience.



Herman

And the Times said the case had all the elements of a thriller, or a sitcom about people with fraudulent passports using code words. That was the paper of record, on the day. They could see it.



Corn

So if the recognition phrases are contaminated, what's clean?



Herman

The codenames. The CIA side is well documented from declassified material. The two-letter digraph plus arbitrary word system. Castro as AMTHUG. Guevara as AMQUACK. An assassination plot against Castro was ZRRIFLE. STORMY was the cryptonym for LSD.



Corn

LSD had a codename.



Herman

Everything had a codename. PBSUCCESS for the Guatemala coup in fifty-four. MONGOOSE for the Cuba campaign.



Corn

And Richard Helms, who ran the Agency, wrote that code names are picked in sequence from a sterile list, with care taken not to use any word that might give a clue to the activity it covers. And then he concedes, occasionally the special code names come close to the nerve, as did MONGOOSE.



Herman

Come close to the nerve. He's admitting the system has a leak in it. A sterile list is supposed to be neutral, but MONGOOSE is not neutral. A mongoose kills snakes. Everyone in that building knew what Cuba meant.



Corn

So the name is a message to the inside, not a disguise for the outside.



Herman

Exactly that. A cryptonym has two audiences, and they want opposite things. The outside audience should learn nothing. The inside audience should learn everything, at a glance, without a memo. MONGOOSE does both. It tells Langley this is the Cuba account, and it tells anyone who intercepts it nothing except that somebody likes animals.



Corn

And it persists. Vault 7, the WikiLeaks release in 2017, had surveillance tools called Weeping Angel, Brutal Kangaroo, Fine Dining, HammerDrill, HarpyEagle.



Herman

Which is the same convention running into the cyber era. Weeping Angel is a Doctor Who reference. Somebody in a basement in Langley is naming their tooling after television.



Corn

Weeping Angel. That's a creature that moves when you stop looking at it.



Herman

Which is, if you think about it, a perfect name for a piece of surveillance software, and also exactly the sort of thing Helms meant by coming close to the nerve. The name tells you the threat model.



Corn

So the CIA names things to be legible internally and opaque externally, and mostly succeeds, and occasionally produces something like AMQUACK.



Herman

AMQUACK for Guevara is funny, and I don't think it was meant to be.



Corn

Somebody typed it. Somebody approved it. There was a meeting.



Herman

There was a form.



Corn

Now, the Stasi, because the Stasi is where this turns.



Herman

The Stasi is the counter-example, and it's the strangest answer in the whole episode. Informants in the Ministry for State Security mostly picked their own cover names.



Corn

They named themselves.



Herman

And in January 1993, a Germanist called Ingrid Kühn published a study of four thousand five hundred IM codenames from the Halle region, and the motives she found ranged from the routine to the cynical to what she called secret longing.



Corn

Secret longing.



Herman

People using the codename as a small private fantasy. And the results read like a comedy sketch. A hairdresser chose Figaro. A citizen whose actual surname was Licht, which means light, chose Dunkel, which means dark.



Corn

He named himself the opposite of his own name.



Herman

A chief accountant chose Manko, which means defect. A dentist chose Brücke, bridge. The head of a hygiene station chose Mikrobe.



Corn

A hygiene inspector calling himself Microbe is either self-aware or it's the best accidental joke in the German language.



Herman

There are animal names all over it, Taube to Fuchs, dove to fox. And then the aspirational ones. Einstein. Don Juan. Venus. Beethoven. Ramses.



Corn

Ramses.



Herman

A man in Halle, in nineteen seventy-something, filing reports on his neighbours, and signing them Ramses.



Corn

Here's what I want to know. If the Stasi could see the names, why did they allow the Figaros?



Herman

Because the codename wasn't the security control. The security control was structural.



Corn

Say more.



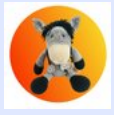
Herman

Markus Wolf ran the HVA, the foreign intelligence arm. His system split every agent's records into three separate card indexes. Formblatt-16, Formblatt-22, and the Statistikbögen, the statistics cards. Each card held a different slice of the same person. Nothing was linked except through a single HVA registration number. And he kept the lot deliberately non-electronic.



Corn

Because a computer is one file.



Herman

Because a computer is one file, and one stolen file unmasks everyone. Three card systems means a stolen drawer tells you almost nothing. You get a name and no address, or an address and no name, and the number that joins them is somewhere else.



Corn

And that's why the Rosenholz material was so hard.



Herman

The microfilms. Roughly three hundred and seventeen thousand personnel cards and seventy-seven thousand codeword cards, microfilmed in 1985, eventually transferred to around three hundred and eighty CD-ROMs. They reached the CIA in 1992 and it took years to work out what they were looking at.



Corn

Because the cards only make sense in combination.



Herman

That's the real defence. Not the weirdness of the phrase. The compartmentalisation of the paper.



Corn

So the Stasi names could be as funny as they liked, because a funny name doesn't compromise you if the name can't be joined to an address.



Herman

You could publish the codenames in the newspaper. Without the registration number they're just a list of nouns.



Corn

So we've got two answers to Daniel's question and they contradict each other.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

On one side, ordinary language is the operational ideal. Those 2010 phrases are banal on purpose. California, Beijing, Bangkok, Malta. They're places anyone might have been. The phrase has to survive being overheard on a train, and it only does that if it sounds like nothing.



Herman

And on the other side, the services keep picking names that come close to the nerve. MONGOOSE. AMTHUG. Ramses.



Corn

So which is it?



Herman

Both, because they're two different systems doing two different jobs. A recognition phrase is spoken in public, so it has to be dull. A cryptonym is written in files, so it can be vivid. The Stasi codename is a third thing entirely, an internal label that was only ever supposed to be joined to a person through a filing system, so it could be anything.



Corn

And that explains why the American names are funny in a different way from the German ones.



Herman

Say it.



Corn

The CIA names are funny because a committee tried to be neutral and failed. AMQUACK is a committee's idea of an arbitrary word. MONGOOSE is a committee's idea of a neutral word that isn't neutral. The Stasi names are funny because a single human being, alone in a room, decided that if he had to inform on his neighbours, he was at least going to be Figaro.



Herman

That's the difference. Institutional whimsy versus individual whimsy.



Corn

A committee can't be funny on purpose. A hairdresser can.



Herman

And that connects to something Mark Stout at the International Spy Museum said about the 2010 case. He called ten a preposterously large number. During the Cold War, he said, we've never had ten at once, let alone ten operating together. And he described the cover as ten years of effort to infiltrate a travel agency.



Corn

Ten years, to run a travel agency.



Herman

That's the punchline of the whole affair. The grand Russian illegals programme, the thing that produced Chapman and the Maltese magazine contact, ultimately got someone a job selling package holidays.



Corn

Which loops back to Daniel's actual question. How much of the Cold War spy encounter is fiction and how much is borrowed from tradecraft?



Herman

The trench coat, the password exchanged in a doorway, the single decisive recognition phrase that resolves everything, that's fiction and comedy. It's how you stage a spy scene. What's real is a hairdresser calling himself Figaro, a woman being told to say the Hamptons, and three card indexes joined by a number nobody wrote down twice.



Corn

The real thing is stranger in a different direction.



Herman

It's stranger because it's duller. The fiction has to be dramatic because drama is the point. The reality has to be invisible, because being invisible is the point, and the comedy leaks out anyway.



Corn

Which is exactly why the Joly sketch works.



Herman

It works because it exaggerates a convention that exists. He does the trench coat and the solemn question and the wrong-stranger mix-up, and every part of that has a basis. He just turns the volume up until you can see it.



Corn

And Daniel's recollection of the exact line, the weather in Leningrad, I couldn't verify that.



Herman

The documented recurring code in the sketch is "You are Grey Squirrel, yes?"



Corn

Grey Squirrel. Which is also a cryptonym, if you think about it. Somebody at Langley would have approved that.



Herman

Somebody probably did.



Corn

I want to go back to something you said. That the phrase has to survive being overheard on a train.



Herman

Yes.



Corn

Because that's the constraint that produces all this comedy. If you need a phrase that fits any conversation happening in a public place, you're going to end up with people discussing the weather in Leningrad, or asking whether they met in Beijing. The banality isn't a failure of imagination, it's the design requirement.



Herman

And the SVR presumably knows this, which is why the 2010 phrases are so careful about geography and seasons. Every one of them is anchored to a plausible shared past. California last summer. Beijing in two thousand four. Bangkok in April. Malta in ninety-nine.



Corn

And every one of them can be answered with a correction, which keeps the exchange running long enough for both people to be confident without ever saying anything incriminating.



Herman

If you're overheard, you're two people who might have met at a conference.



Corn

If you're overheard with a folded newspaper and five thousand dollars, you're somebody's problem.



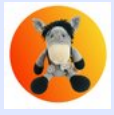
Herman

That's the signal rather than the phrase. The signal is the risky part, not the words.



Corn

Which raises the question of whether the absurd ones are the failures or the successes.



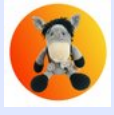
Herman

You could argue absurdity is protective, in one narrow sense. A phrase so odd that only the intended person could possibly respond to it is unmistakable. If you ask a stranger in a trench coat whether they were in Harbin, and they say yes, you've almost certainly found your person.



Corn

Because nobody else could accidentally say yes.



Herman

Right, but that's a trade-off. It's unmistakable and it's memorable. A stranger who gets asked that once will remember it for the rest of their life. Whereas the dull phrase is forgettable, which is what you want if the wrong person overhears it.



Corn

So the dull phrase is optimised for the wrong person overhearing it, and the odd phrase is optimised for the right person recognising it.



Herman

And in practice, the dull phrase wins, because in a public place you're always one conversation away from being noticed.



Corn

Which is why the Hamptons line is the better tradecraft, and MONGOOSE is the better name for a file.



Herman

Different audiences. Same principle.



Corn

You realise we've just explained why the joke works.



Herman

Because the joke is a real convention at the wrong volume.



Corn

Joly's character isn't funny because espionage is absurd. He's funny because espionage is dull, and he's performed it at the volume of a thriller. The mismatch is the joke.



Herman

And Daniel's right that the 2010 case collapses the gap. Somewhere in Moscow, presumably, there's a training file that says, when approached, correct the geography. And somewhere in London, in a television studio, there's a man in a trench coat asking a stranger about the weather in a city he's never been to. And they're both doing the same thing.



Corn

One of them's just being paid for it in a different currency.



Hilbert

There's a shoebox.



Hilbert

In my flat. Cardboard, size of a phone book. There's a Formblatt-16 in it.



Herman

You have an original Stasi personnel card.



Hilbert

I have a photocopy of one. The original is in Halle.



Corn

Whose card?



Hilbert

My aunt's. Not blood. A friend of my mother's, we called her aunt. She was an IM in Halle, and her codename was Klette.



Herman

Klette is burdock. The plant.



Hilbert

It's a weed that sticks to your clothes and doesn't come off. I asked her once why she picked it, and she said it was the only thing in the garden that would not let go.



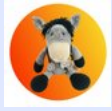
Corn

That's a joke about her own job.



Hilbert

It's in the Kühn study. I can't remember the page.



Herman

You're saying she chose it.



Hilbert

She chose it. She said it was the only honest thing about the paperwork.



Corn

And the shoebox?



Hilbert

I lent the card to a neighbour. He wanted a bookmark. He was reading something long, and he said the card was stiff, which it is, they're thick. That was four years ago. He's moved to Halle. I've been writing to him, care of the address printed on the card.



Corn

The address on the card.



Hilbert

It's the records office. I know it's the records office. I've known for two years. It's the only address I have for him, and he's still got my aunt's card, so I keep writing.



Herman

And he hasn't replied.



Hilbert

No. But the letters are being opened, so I assume somebody's reading them.



Corn

Hilbert, if you're writing to the Stasi records office about a neighbour who lives in Halle, they have both halves of the puzzle. You've handed them the card and the address.



Hilbert

They're a records office. That's what they're for.



Herman

So you're saying the Stasi names are funnier than the CIA ones.



Hilbert

Yes. But not for the reason you two gave.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

AMQUACK is committee humour. Nobody chose it. Somebody typed it into a form because it was on the sterile list. A committee cannot be funny on purpose, and it can't be funny by accident either, it just produces AMQUACK and moves on. Figaro is different. A hairdresser sat down, in a room, with a form in front of him, and decided that if the state wanted a name for him, he would give them the name of the barber in the opera. That's a man making a joke at the expense of the Ministry, in the only space they left him.



Corn

And nobody at the Ministry noticed.



Hilbert

They filed it. There's a card in Halle with Figaro on it, and somewhere there's a man's real name on a different card, and a number that joins them.



Herman

Which is Wolf's system doing exactly what it was designed to do. You can be Figaro and it doesn't matter, because Figaro is not joined to anything without the number.



Hilbert

My aunt used to say the same thing. She said the name was hers and the file was theirs.



Corn

Hilbert, is there a second codename in the shoebox material?



Hilbert

There's Dunkel on one of the cards.



Corn

Dunkel.



Hilbert

There was a filing error in sixty-eight. She was reassigned to a different handler and the old name got attached to the new card. So for about eighteen months she was both.



Herman

Klette and Dunkel. Burdock and dark.



Corn

You've got the only person in the Kühn data who was two people at once, and the card is being used as a bookmark by a man in Halle you can't reach.



Hilbert

The card's in the shoebox. The shoebox is under the window. It's just that the card isn't in it.



Corn

Is the shoebox real?



Hilbert

I can bring it in.



Corn

Not the card. The shoebox.



Hilbert

Yes.



Corn

And you're not going to tell us whether the aunt is real.



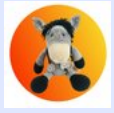
Hilbert

She made very good jam.



Corn

Let's leave the shoebox aside and pull back to the bigger question.



Herman

Which is the one Daniel actually asked. If some of those 2010 phrases came from an FBI agent, how much of what we think we know about Russian tradecraft is actually counterintelligence theatre?



Corn

And the second one. The CIA picks from a sterile list, the Stasi let a hairdresser pick his own name, and the comedy each system produces is completely different. The naming convention tells you more about the service than the names do.



Herman

A committee that tries to be neutral tells you it doesn't trust its own people with the truth. A system that lets an informant name himself tells you it doesn't think the name matters. Both of those are admissions.



Corn

And the third thing, looking forward. Vault 7 ran the same gag into the cyber era, Weeping Angel, Brutal Kangaroo, Fine Dining. The naming convention didn't die with the human agents. It just moved into software.



Herman

Somewhere right now there's an operation called something ridiculous, and it's working.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer. If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode thirty-five, The Privacy Gap; episode three thirty-three, Before the CIA; and episode nine eighty-four, The Paper Trip Paradox. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you want more, the whole archive is at my weird prompts dot com, and the feed is on any podcast app you like.



Corn

Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

We'll be back soon.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

1. **FBI [primary]**
   Operation Ghost Stories: Inside the Russian Spy Case, 2011-10-31
   https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/operation-ghost-stories-inside-the-russian-spy-case

2. **BBC News**
   FBI allegations against 'Russian spies' in US, 2010-06-29
   https://www.bbc.com/news/10442869

3. **Reuters / The Moscow Times**
   Excerpts From U.S. Justice Department Papers on Spy Ring, 2010-06-30 [primary excerpts]
   https://www.themoscowtimes.com/archive/excerpts-from-us-justice-department-papers-on-spy-ring

4. **NPR**
   Invisible Ink And Codes Figure In Russian Spies Case, 2010-06-29
   https://www.npr.org/2010/06/29/128193257/invisible-ink-and-codes-figure-in-russian-spies-case

5. **The New York Times**
   Curiosities Emerge About Suspected Russian Agents, 2010-06-30
   https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/30/nyregion/30suspects.html

6. **Wikipedia**
   CIA cryptonym
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CIA_cryptonyms

7. **The Guardian**
   Did Doctor Who really inspire a CIA surveillance codename? 2017-03-08
   https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2017/mar/08/doctor-who-inspire-cia-codenames-wikileaks-surveillance-programmes

8. **taz/dpa**
   Von 'Klette' bis 'Don Juan', 1993-01-07
   https://taz.de/Von-Klette-bis-Don-Juan/!1636370/

9. **mahendrarajah.com**
   Markus Wolf's Spycraft: Decrypting Stasi's 'Rosenholz Files', 2024-05-17
   https://mahendrarajah.com/2024/05/17/markus-wolfs-spycraft-decrypting-stasis-rosenholz-files/

10. **TV Tropes**
    Trigger Happy TV
    https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Series/TriggerHappyTV

11. **The Guardian**
    Dom Joly: how we made Trigger Happy TV, 2020-02-24
    https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/feb/24/dom-joly-how-we-made-trigger-happy-tv

12. **Russian Life**
Now THAT'S a Reset Button! 2010-06-28
https://www.russianlife.com/the-russia-file/now-thats-a-reset-button/