

Thinking Sideways Podcast
Episode 4: The McCormick Cypher
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[Theme song plays]

Steve: Thanks for coming back. I'm Steve.

Devin: I'm Devin.

Joe: And I'm Joe.

Steve: And we're going to give you a new story today. A story about a murder most foul.

[Suspenseful music begins]

Steve: Our story begins - or ends, if you want to look at it that way - on June 30th, 1999. The body of Ricky McCormick was found face down in a cornfield...

[Suspenseful music ends]

[Outdoors sound effects begin]

Steve: ...20 miles from his home in St. Louis Missouri

[Outdoors sound effects end]

Steve: Ricky had officially been missing for three days, though his family said they hadn't seen him in five, but when his body was found, it was in a pretty extreme state of decomposition to the point that the fingers on his hands were falling off.

Devin: Ugh!

Joe: Wow, that's more than five days' worth, I think.

Steve: Well, yeah...

Devin: Wait, where was it?

Steve: It was St. Louis, Missouri.

Devin: And it was in the summer?

Steve: It was in the summer.

Devin: Okay, it could have been.

Joe: Maybe. It's pretty humid back there...

Steve: Yeah.

Joe: ...but how old was Ricky, by the way?

Steve: Ricky was 41.

Joe: Okay.

Devin: Okay.

Steve: And he wasn't in the primmest of health.

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: He wasn't a healthy guy.

Devin: Okay.

Steve: But obviously, they find him and he's pretty well decomposing which made it very difficult for an autopsy. The county coroner or pathologist, whichever it is, decided that they would go ahead and do their best on his 72-pound body, or the 72 pounds that remained...

Devin: Ugh...

Steve: ...and see what they could find. In the report, the pathologist eventually said that the cause of death was undetermined. They couldn't figure out why he died.

Devin: So it wasn't anything obvious like a giant bullet hole or something?

Steve: Correct. No obvious sign of death - or cause of death, excuse me.

Devin: Sure.

Joe: Maybe he just ate a little too much corn.

Steve: He might have. [**laughs**] Sat in the sun and it popped in his stomach. Yeah, that's it.

Devin: Ugh!

Joe: Uh huh.

Devin: That would be why he decomposed so fast, too.

Steve: Yeah. So that is the beginning and then the mysteries begin.

Devin: Okay.

Steve: Tee first of which is nobody knows how Ricky got there. He didn't own a car. He's twenty miles away from where he lived, in a cornfield, basically in a rural area it sounds like...

Devin: Mhm...

Steve: ...so we don't know how he got there. Though the police investigated, no killer was ever identified because there was never any solid leads in the case. There just weren't any clues and the trail went completely cold.

Devin: Huh.

Joe: So the cornfield: was it a really developed cornfield with 6-foot high corn stalks and all that? That kind of cornfield or...?

Steve: I think it was next to a cornfield or just on the edge of...

Joe: Oh.

Steve: ...because it was right off the road.

Joe: Oh, okay. So it wasn't the farmer that found him, it was just that somebody drove by and threw the body out kind of thing?

Steve: Well...

Joe: Probably?

Steve: Yeah. We're guessing that's what happened with the body. We don't know. If I remember the details correctly, a motorist found him.

Devin: Okay.

Steve: But that's all that I can glean from exactly how he was found. The other details in this story take precedence and so those little details seem to get left behind...

Joe: Mhm. Yeah.

Steve: Does anybody have any idea why we're talking about this?

Joe: It's got corn in it!

[**Steve laughs**]

Devin: Yeah!

Joe: Anything with corn in it is cool!

Steve: Uh, that is not it.

Joe: No? Okay.

Steve: The reason we're talking about this is that twelve years after he was murdered, the FBI began to release information about the case...

Devin: What?

Steve: ...and turn to the public to ask for help!

Devin: Okay...

Steve: The FBI, the knowers of all, of plausible deniability, don't know the answer to this case.

Devin: Huh.

Steve: Here's what the problem is.

Devin: Okay.

Steve: When they found his body and they searched his pockets and they went through all of his belongings, the only thing they found on him were two notes in his pockets that contained over thirty lines of cypher text...

Devin: Oh...

Steve: ...encoded text. They've been working on it for twelve years. This is considered one of their top cases because it's so mysterious for them that they eventually turned around and they asked the public for help.

Devin: Wow!

Steve: The FBI actually went ahead and set up a page on their website initially asking for information but it got so much traffic. Now they actually have a dedicated site - or dedicated page on their site - where it has the copies of the notes and you can go ahead and download them and read them and try to figure it out yourself. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Devin: Okay.

Steve: Let's step back a little and let's talk about Ricky because...

Devin: Sure.

Steve: ...he wasn't the best guy in the world and I'd like to give a little bit of history on him because that might help shed some light on these weird notes which then we'll go into.

Devin: Okay.

Steve: He had spent some time in prison for...

Devin: Well, he lived in St. Louis, didn't he?

Steve: He did.

Joe: There you go.

Steve: He spent some time in prison for sex abuse. Evidently, he'd fathered four children with three or four different women, though he never really as evidently involved with their lives - the children's or the women's - after impregnation...

Joe: Ah. Of course.

Steve: One of those ladies was actually fourteen when the child was conceived...

Joe: Ha!

Steve: ...he was an adult.

Joe: What a classy guy!

Devin: Ugh...

Steve: Yeah. He went from being homeless to living at his mom's. He could barely hold down a job. He wasn't the highest on the social ladder and, ladies and gentlemen, I preface this with: this is a quote, this is directly what was said, is that his mother referred to him as "retarded".

Devin: Hmm.

Joe: Oh.

Steve: Not the sharpest stick, evidently.

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: His family, however, did like to say that he was street smart but they agreed that he was troubled.

Joe: So not a guy that's really going to be able to compose an unbreakable cypher, huh?

Steve: You would think...

Joe: Yeah.

Devin: I feel like that's exactly the kind of person who would compose this...

Joe: He might have been a savant. It's possible, yeah.

Devin: Well, people who aren't thinking totally clearly often make mistakes in their cyphers making them really indecipherable, right? I mean that's the...

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: That's true! That is a good point.

Devin: ...the big problem with disturbed minds.

Joe: Well, and it can also be too that - the cypher - was it numbers? Letters? A combination of both?

Steve: Both.

Devin: Uh...

Joe: Both letters and numbers.

Steve: It was both.

Joe: Both. It's entirely possible that it's not even a cyphered message at all...

Steve: Well, we'll get into that, because there is that possibility and you, Devin, bring up a good point, is: maybe he makes it harder because of his mental state.

Devin: Right.

Steve: He could barely read or write or he was very poor at it. His handwriting -which I'll bring up the notes here in a minute and you guys can take a look at them - his handwriting is very, very poor. It's very difficult to read. But he supposedly - and there's some conjecture on this - supposedly, every since he was a small child, had been making up codes of his own all the time. So he might have been doing this since he was a kid, so he had some crazy key built into his head just over repetition...

Devin and Joe: Mhm...

Steve: Which makes it even harder to crack because, well, the only person who knows the answer is now dead.

Devin: Right.

Steve: It is believed that they figured out the order of the notes because one of them does have "P 1" in the upper right hand corner...

Devin: Mhm...

Steve: ...which for you and I would indicate "Page 1".

Devin: Mhm.

Steve: It might not be that. It might be something other in another piece of code that we don't realize, but people have been using that as the basis of, "This is Page 1, and this is how we're going to go ahead and try to figure out the cypher."

Devin: Mmm.

Joe: And there were two pages, right?

Steve: Two pages. That is correct. Like I said, the FBI had been trying to crack this for a long time and gave up and I've got some quotes directly form them. This is actually from Dan Olson. He's the chief of the FBI's Cryptanalysis and Racketeering Records Unit.

[**Devin laughs**]

Steve: Yeah...

Devin: What a cool job title

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: Really!

Devin: Yeah.

Steve: But hard to get on a nametag.

Devin: Yeah...

Joe: But it's kind of weird they get lumped in together, cryptanalysis and racketeering, what?

Steve: Well, the mob uses cyphers all the time. They use codes.

Joe: Yeah, I know, but still, cryptanalysis is kind of a thing. The FBI does a lot of counter-espionage so you would think that they would be using cryptanalysis even more heavily for that kind of thing.

Steve: True.

Joe: Anyway, that's irrelevant.

Steve: That's an aside.

Joe: Yeah, anyway, who cares?

Steve: But here's what Dan Olson says. He says and I quote: "We're really good at what we do, but we could use some help on this one. Breaking this code could reveal the victim's whereabouts before his death and could lead to the solution of a homicide. Not every cypher we get arrives at our door under these circumstances. Even if we found out that he was writing a grocery list or a love letter, we would still want to see how the code is solved. This is a cypher system we know nothing about..."

Joe: Mhm.

Steve: "...Maybe someone with a fresh set of eyes might come up with a brilliant new idea." And let me repeat that line: "This is a cypher system we know nothing about."

Joe: Mhm.

Steve: Essentially, it's a brand new cypher to the FBI based on the way it's organized and put together. It could be, as one of you said, he could be a bit of a savant when it came to codes.

Devin: Yeah.

Joe: Could be.

Steve: Slow on everything else, but super great at puzzles.

Devin: Right.

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: I was hearing the other day that people with Asperger's and autism are typically the ones that are savants with math.

Devin: Mhm.

Steve: They're really good with those, so there are relations in the brain of chemistry and function...

Devin: Absolutely.

Steve: ...so it could be right along the same lines.

Devin and Joe: Yeah.

Joe: So, I take it the FBI must have turned this stuff over to the NSA?

Steve: I would imagine...

Joe: You would think that they did.

Steve: ...that they went for a lot inter-governmental support on this one.

Joe: You would think that they'd take it to the NSA before they would put it on the internet, you know?

Devin: Yeah, absolutely.

Steve: It's been twelve years.

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: I would imagine that they went ahead and they pursued every avenue...

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: ...that was available to them. I don't imagine that they said, "Oh no! We're not talking to those guys! We don't like those kooks!"

Joe: Ah, you never know about the government. Sometimes they don't like each other.

Steve: Eh...

Devin: I feel like they like each other more than they like the public, though.

Joe: Oh, that's a good point.

[**Steve laughs**]

Joe: That's a good point.

Devin: Yeah.

Joe: But yeah, if they sicced a bunch of crazed supercomputers on that thing and they weren't able to get it, then I don't know, man.

Steve: It's hard to say. But then again, a supercomputer only knows how to follow formulas whereas you and I can look at something and make that leap of... not a leap of faith, but that leap of intuition and suddenly it all falls into place which computers aren't able to do at this point.

Joe: I have a strong feeling we're going to break it tonight, actually.

Steve: From what I've gleaned from readings tuff from the FBI and all these other news reports, it appears to be what's known as a simple substitution cypher...

Devin and Joe: Mhm.

Steve: ...which, for those of you that don't know is: A is replaced with the letter B and B is replaced with the letter C or some variant of that.

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: It seems relatively basic from the outside but there is some information based on posts that I've read of people that are trying to crack it that it could be a polygraphic substitution cypher. From what I can understand, a polygraphic substitution cypher is where it is actually letter pairs are taken and they replace other letter pairs so "TH" now becomes "BD", but "TR" would become "CQ", if you know where I'm going with this.

Devin: Ugh, codes are so complicated.

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: It's in total sequence, 2 by 2 and that adds so much more variability because it's not 26 letters, it's all these letter pairings. Plus you can throw numbers in the mix, which Ricky did.

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: So there's this huge number of possibilities. Or, again as we said, it could be just something unique to him...

Devin: Yeah.

Steve: ...that only he understood.

Joe: And it could also be that it's just gibberish. [laughs]

Steve: It absolutely could and that's where the speculation comes in, Joe - and that's good timing on your part - is that the speculation is: it's gibberish. It's this guy who was mentally unstable just writing garbage...

Joe: Uh huh.

Steve: ...and it doesn't make sense to anybody because it didn't make sense to him in the state that he was when he wrote it. There is also speculation that it could be a set of notes that he wrote at the time that he was with whoever killed him so there's the possibility that cracking this code would shed light on how he died or why he died or who killed him...

Devin: Mhm.

Steve: ...basically helping solve the murder.

Joe: Yeah.

Devin: Sure.

Joe: It seems unlikely because frankly, if you get to write a note knowing that you're probably about to die and you want to write a note incriminating Mr. X over here to your left, are you going to really put it in an unbreakable code or are you just going to write it in plain English?

Devin: Well, if he'd been doing codes his whole life and this was his code, it likely seemed incredibly simple to him...

Joe: Mhm.

Devin: ... that he would think, "Well, anybody could break this, if they took the time..."

Joe: Mhm.

Devin: "...because I'm an idiot and I know how to do it."

Joe: Oh, absolutely, but again, why do you put it in code at all?

Devin: Because the other guy's watching.

Joe: Mmm.

Steve: Or he just did that all the time.

Devin: That's how he... yeah...

Steve: That may have been his automatic way to write. He may have just written down his grocery list.

Devin: Yeah.

Steve: He wrote his grocery list out and somebody said, "What the heck is-" "Well, it's my grocery list."

Devin: Mhm.

Steve: "What do you mean, can't you read that?"

Devin: Yeah.

Steve: It just may have been second nature to him.

Joe: Yeah.

Devin: You said his English was bad, right?

Steve: Mhm.

Devin: Then maybe that was...

Steve: That was the way he compensated.

Devin: Yeah.

Steve: It might have been some crazy phonetics in his brain, like a phonetic system.

Devin: Mhm.

Steve: If I piece these things together... we don't know if maybe he was dyslexic so maybe that's how he wrote things but then he broke it into a code. There's all these variables that simply not a clue exists to.

Devin: Yeah.

Steve: Not a single answer so far.

Devin: Yeah.

Steve: Let me go ahead and pull up the note for you, or both the notes for you guys so you can take a look at them.

Joe: All right.

Devin: Sure.

Steve: So obviously, as you can tell when you're looking at them, it's very scribbled and it is difficult to tell what's going on in there.

Devin: It is, yeah.

Steve: Did you as you look at it - and I can pull up if we want but I don't know if it'll help - I do have a version that has it typed out in the actual text is typed rather than handwritten, but it seems like - and I said this before, it seems almost phonetic. As you read it...

Devin: It does, a little bit. I can kind of... my brain can make sense of little snippets of it.

Steve: Yeah. Two, three letter at a time...

Devin: Yeah...

Steve: But the context, you can't put the whole thing together...

Devin: Yeah. There's an "if" there...

Steve: What appears to be a "lose" ... An "L", so it starts with an "R"...

Devin: Yeah, it's interesting.

Steve: It seems so simple but when you look at it - and I think the handwriting is what makes it deceptive that way - is it seems like it's written in a child's handwriting. It should be easy to figure out until it hits you in the head with a rook and stumps you. Which is exactly what it did to everybody.

Devin: Yeah, but down here, it says like, "1/2" something "please". "P-L-S-E".

Steve: It looks like a "D-L-S-E" to me.

Devin: Oh, it looks like a "P" to me. See?

Steve: Exactly!

Devin: Yeah, it's hard!

Steve: This is what makes it so difficult! If we are staring at it and already getting to argue after thirty seconds, imagine what these poor fools at the FBI were doing.

Devin: "D-W-M-4"... "X-D"... Yeah. Maybe the typed out version would be more helpful but I don't think there's any chance of cracking this.

Joe: I think it might be gibberish.

Steve: I think that it is going to be uncrackable because obviously the key went with Ricky to his grave.

Joe: Mhm.

Steve: As of today, the murder is still unsolved. We still don't know exactly what happened.

Devin: That's a little depressing.

Joe: Yeah, it would be interesting. So, I take it the FBI probably did other investigations beyond this. They must have talked to his family and friends and found out who he was associating with.

Steve: Yes. And he did not associate with the best folks. Again, if he had a handicap of some kind or some kind of mental issue, he may have just not thought about it and didn't realize that he was getting himself into a bad situation and somebody might have taken advantage of it.

Joe: Mhm.

Steve: It's difficult to say.

Joe: Yeah.

Devin: My twist on this is that his murderer was like, "Yeah, you can write all the different notes you want if you write it in this [beep] handwriting you use."

[Steve laughs]

Joe: Yeah.

Devin: Because he knew that that would be the only person that...

Steve: Yeah.

Devin: And the guy's like, "I'm going to write a letter for help!" and he's like, "Yeah. Fine."

Steve: "Go for it, buddy."

Devin: "Do whatever you want, man."

Joe and Steve: Yeah!

Devin: Fine!

Steve: Very well could have been it. I don't know.

Joe: Yeah.

Devin: Gosh.

Joe: Well, my theory is that he had all this encrypted stuff around and some of his scumbag friends saw this and said, "Why are you encrypting this stuff?" It's like, "This is directions on how to find this buried treasure," you know? "Billions of dollars worth of gold bullion," and everything like that. So they tortured him until he finally - even though it was gibberish - he finally said, "Okay, you drive out here, here, here, twenty paces this way, thirty paces this way, and it's there." And they were like, "Great!" and they kill him and they dump the body in a cornfield. And of course, when they get to where the buried treasure is, well, the joke's on them.

Steve: Who knows? There's no answers. There is, however, a bit of follow-up mystery...

Devin: Oh!

Joe: Oh, cool!

Steve: ...to this whole thing...

Devin: Okay.

Steve: ...and we've encountered this on stories before and let me give you some of this follow-up mystery or twist. Four years before Ricky died - so this is 1995 - the police found the body of an alleged prostitute who was shot to death in a house near where Ricky was found on the same stretch of road, not too far away.

Devin: Sure.

Steve: In 2001, road crews found the bodies of two naked women 300 yards from where Ricky's body was found.

Devin: Huh.

Steve: It could be that there potentially could be some psychopath that's out there that's using that stretch of road to do their business and dump their either or their bodies off of and Ricky might - this may not have anything to do. Again, it might just be...

Joe: Pure coincidence, yeah.

Steve: ...coincidence that this happened or it might be coincidence that he had these notes in his pocket and he just got caught up in something that somebody was doing that they had their own compulsion for but it could also mean that he was identifying who the killer was.

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: He might have found out about it and they came after him and he wrote it down and they couldn't figure out what it was and they let him go.

Joe: To get back to what I was saying, everybody, including the FBI, thinks that what is in this message is something of supreme value which is why they're devoting huge resources to it. So if you're one of Ricky's scumbag friends and you find this coded message, you're going to draw the same conclusion as the FBI. You're going to think, "There's something of supreme value in here." And you're going to torture Ricky until he tells you what was in the message. Now, if it's just gibberish, he'll just make something up. [laughs] And that could be what it is...

Steve: The problem is, we don't know...

Joe: ...as pure speculation.

Steve: ...what his cause of death was and he could have been tortured...

Joe: Yeah.

Steve: ...he could have been suffocated. There's no way to know because of how the state of the body was.

Joe: Mhm.

Steve: It's very difficult to know.

Devin and Joe: Yeah.

Joe: I don't know.

Steve: But that's where it ends!

Joe: Yeah. Interesting.

Steve: That's where the whole thing ends.

Devin: So there have been no good attempts at this, huh?

Steve: There are all kinds of sites - and again, I've got the links to them and we'll be putting those up on the page - there are links to people who are trying to figure it out and they're giving their theories and they're working it back and forth, but as of yet, nothing that is even close to being possibly viable. And so, another story that we don't have an answer to.

Joe: Another unsolvable mystery. Yeah, that's the thing about it, is that you don't really know if there is an answer to it.

Steve: Yeah, there may never be.

Joe: There really may never be. Yeah.

Steve: Well, if you folks want to go ahead and you want to check out the links, you want to find these discussion boards and these places or just take a look at the notes themselves, you're more than welcome to do that. All of those will be available on the website. That website is thinkingsidewayspodcast.com. If you think that you have an idea on how to break the cypher and you feel like telling us instead of the FBI, well you're more than welcome to do that. We promise to take credit for it.

Joe: Uh huh!

Steve: You can send us an email at thinkingsidewayspodcast@gmail.com and with that, we're going to get out of here and we look forward to talking to you next week!

Devin: Yeah!

Joe: Yeah. Bye, everybody.

Devin: Bye!

[Outro music plays]