

Grass

Phil Sparrowhawk with
Martin King and
Martin Knight



To Marisa, Casey and Phillipa. The girls in my life. And
thanks to
Imogen for her work and effort.
Philip Sparrowhawk - August 2003

Martin Knight would like to dedicate this book
to Harry Knight (1920-2003)

*For a variety of legal and emotional reasons, some of
the names in this book have been changed.
In other cases, my memory has failed me - I have problems
remembering all my names, let alone others.

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Phil Sparrowhawk
with Martin King and Martin Knight



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FOREWORD BY HOWARD MARKS

It would be imprudent to say for how long the dope smuggling partnership Phil Sparrowhawk and I shared lasted, but during the time it did, we visited several dozen countries together, smuggled countless tons of Thai marijuana and a few tons of hashish, and made millions of pounds. I have never known him smoke a joint. And we are still the best of friends.

Phil's mood, temperament and demeanour never alter. His appearance is constantly nondescript (ideal for a man in our line of business). One could never tell whether Phil was on his tenth million or down to his last pound note. He was a working-class boy, equally fired by the desire to acquire wealth as the quest for adventure. If Phil had been born a century earlier, he would have read the *Boy's Own* paper and become a big-game hunter, exploring far-flung lands in his spare time.

During 1974, I skipped bail and became a fugitive. Disappearing itself is quite simple: one could jog in Iraq or do business in Afghanistan (a task I later entrusted to Phil). If cheating mortality is neither permitted nor desired, one could take the hardcore option of checking into any Third World prison (also experienced by Phil). Forget heterosexuality, good nosh, and breathtaking vistas; but there's plenty of dope, libraries and gymnasiums. Most people, however, prefer freedom.

The two most important parameters relating to successful disappearance are position and appearance. At constantly new locations where one is unknown, appearance is irrelevant. On the other hand, if one's appearance is constantly changing, it doesn't matter where one is. Playing safe, I decided to change my appearance and travel. I

rented a bedsit, stayed inside, either shaved or grew a moustache and beard, adopted a radically new hairstyle, and varied the takeaway diet. Bedsits were boring, so I filled idle moments by applying to the DVLC in Swansea for a few provisional driving licences. I used any names that came to mind and once obtained one in the name of Elvis Presley. The Swansea computer didn't bat an eyelid; it didn't remember the 1950s. I got loads of junk mail in different names. I joined cheesy clubs and got bits of plastic that looked like credit cards. I got real. I got a life. In fact, I got a few lives and supplemented them with different clothes, walking sticks, crutches, eye-patches, scars, wigs, shades, wheelchairs and spectacles. I then took driving tests with the provisional licences and got Post Office Savings accounts with full licences as identification, and with those I got bank accounts. But passports remained elusive. My first meeting with Phil arose out of this need for false identity: a common acquaintance had suggested he could be useful.

Various passports are available in the criminal marketplace, but, ideally, one wants a passport actually issued by one of the passport offices (so that it withstands today's sophisticated border checks) and one wants as few people as possible to know the name (so friends can't grass you up). There are plenty of people, for example certified lunatics and the terminally ill, who can't travel abroad. There are others who have no intention of visiting different countries because they don't trust foreign beer. Filling in an application form with the appropriate details was easy. The tricky bit was getting it countersigned by someone who existed. It seemed much easier to get it countersigned by someone who didn't exist by renting another bedsit in another name and become a referee. But there are only so many rooms one can rent. I needed someone who could give me an address that could be anyone's and answer the phone as whoever I chose. (The only check the Passport Office was ever likely to make was to telephone the referee

and ask if he'd countersigned the application and photograph.) I asked Phil if he could help. He said he would. The rest is his story.

I found *Grass* a delight to read. Some of our combined history I had forgotten, and much of Phil's life before and after our partnership was unknown to me. Phil's extraordinary pragmatism and relaxed attitude to his circumstances and surroundings shine and reveal themselves throughout his book. Only he could spend years in a Thai prison and actually enjoy the experience. Sit down, skin-up, and read.

*Howard Marks,
Spain
August 2003*

Part One

THE END

SPACE INVADERS BANGKOK, THAILAND

JULY 1988

I've tried not to count my blessings ever since. It's asking for trouble. I know I was feeling good that morning because I remember every tiny detail of the entire day; for reasons that will become clear it has etched itself in my memory. The sun was already up and out as I walked out of my door and hopped up into my red Suzuki Jeep. Before I pulled away I glanced over at my house and bathed momentarily in a feeling of wellbeing. I was a successful businessman. Inside, still asleep, were my lovely Thai girlfriend and our wonderful young daughter; I had plenty of money in the bank and enjoyed a jet-setting lifestyle I would never have dreamt of in my younger days. Actually, I did dream about it, that's why I followed the path I did, but I suppose I never really believed I'd get there.

When I turned on the ignition, the radio came on and the plummy but comforting voice of the BBC World Service newsreader floated around the car. My general sense of contentment and absolute control of my destiny increased. Mrs Thatcher was riding high in the opinion polls; she had been in power nearly a decade now and I was hoping for another ten years. Since the retaking of the Falkland Islands a few years earlier she had re-established the perception of Britain as a world power. Maggie was widely believed to be pulling Ronald Reagan's strings and he in turn was forcing President Gorbachev of Russia to slowly disarm. The Cold War was thawing, the world was becoming a safer place and suddenly there was an illusion that the Brits were running the show again. For someone in my line of work this could

only be for the good. Being British gave you a degree of automatic respect in foreign parts and you were less likely to be suspected of being up to any nonsense.

When the radio reporters got on to the subject of what appeared to be the final days of the Iran-Iraq war (it seemed to be drawing to a close only because they were running out of people to kill on either side), I switched over to an American radio station and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel along to Grace Slick singing 'Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now'. 'Her band,' the DJ said, 'is called Starship.' I remembered it as Jefferson Airplane, but there you go, you've got to move with the times. The song summed up my mood perfectly.

I joined the flow of traffic from my suburb into the centre of Bangkok and proceeded at a snail's pace. Business commuters jockeyed for scarce road space with open-backed Toyota trucks and tuk-tuks full of smiling Thais off to work on the building sites. By now, and as usual, traffic was virtually at a standstill, so when I saw two men on motorbikes stationary behind me, I knew I was being followed. If not, they could and would have weaved and squeezed in and out of the cars to beat the jam. I was not too alarmed or surprised at this, however, as a business associate had warned me a few days before that officers from the US Drugs Enforcement Agency (DEA) were closing in and that I should be extremely careful.

The DEA, and one US Government agent in particular, had got it into their heads that the entire world's ills were mainly the fault of a man called Howard Marks, who they knew had been moving cannabis around the globe for many years. Although he was British, Welsh to be precise, he was, I suppose, America's most wanted in their 'fight against drugs'. Howard famously had been acquitted by an Old Bailey jury in 1981 of drug trafficking and had put a number of noses out of joint when he continued to ply his trade, in

an open and brash fashion, in the eyes of the authorities at least.

I had been doing business with Howard for many years. A decade earlier, I had worked for him, but nowadays he was simply one of my many partners, customers and business associates. While I knew that the DEA were sniffing around me, I didn't realise at the time that my long association with Howard had made me second only to him on the long list of DEA targets.

I had heard some weeks before from one of my Thai contacts that questions were being asked about me by the Americans and that I was likely to be arrested by the Thai police. I was led to believe this would be more to show willing than anything else. You have to realise that the Thai race does not share the abhorrence the Western world affects over soft drugs. Grass grows naturally, like hops, on their land and until the sex industry developed, it was the main export underpinning their economy. But when the world's superpowers tell you the flow of these substances has to stop, you have to play their game. Especially if they are pumping billions of dollars into your economy.

I hadn't been particularly concerned about the interest being shown in my affairs, as I had large amounts of money and lived in a country where money not only spoke, it positively hollered. I believed that my connections in high places in Thailand were sufficiently influential to protect me. I had someone on the inside at the DEA who was feeding me the information I needed to keep one step ahead of them, so I had the confidence of a man who had been getting away with it all his life. Finally, despite the risks, I was determined to complete the transaction I was working on - exporting five tons of grass into Amsterdam for shipment on to Australia - before I started worrying about the DEA, the CIA, New Scotland Yard, or anyone else. I had decided that this deal would be my last and I would focus entirely on my legitimate interests. Hence my 'end of term' mood.

The bike riders clearly weren't fully alert yet because I swung a left without indicating and before they clocked it I had chucked a right and lost them. I sighed and continued along a back-road route to the small hotel I had previously checked into. I always used a small hotel when I was in the middle of a deal: using their phone was safer than using any of mine. It was only a tenner a night - although, of course, I had no use for it at night - and I got a decent room and some privacy. My real office was just around the corner in an old-style Thai house, and from there I publicly ran my legitimate food export business and, up until recently, my popular and respectable massage parlour, which was a concession in the Hyatt Central Hotel.

When I got back on to the Sukhumvit Road, unfortunately I ran straight into the motorcyclists and this time they were so close that I could see their faces. They were Thais though, not Westerners, and that made me feel a little easier. Nevertheless, I pulled into the car park of the Ambassador Hotel, got out of the car and left my briefcase on the back seat. The briefcase contained all the papers and necessary documentation pertaining to the Amsterdam deal and I thought it safer to leave it there. Without looking back, I walked through the main entrance of the Ambassador and straight out the back entrance, and then took off to the hotel I was really using. I couldn't see if the men were following me.

In the hotel, Uncle Joe, an Australian man in his 50s with the swarthy tanned features of a ship's captain, was waiting for me outside his room. I was supplying Joe with the Thai grass he would be importing into Australia via Holland. Although geographically Thailand was far closer to Australia than Holland, it was still cheaper and smoother for me to send it to Amsterdam and for Joe to get it shipped to Oz from there. The Dutch were more laid back about this type of thing and demanded far less in bribes.

'I think I'm being followed, Uncle,' I said and started to tell Joe about the morning's events. I had already told him about the arrest tip-off. Joe scratched his beard. He was not a man to panic - he'd been in this line of business for years and these days didn't touch a deal of less than five tons. That would fetch around A\$25 million on the streets of Sydney. Joe organised the private yachts that brought the grass into his country and the initial onward distribution.

'Your brother called from England,' he said. 'He seemed worried about something.'

I immediately phoned Tony and was taken aback to hear that I *had* been arrested. He read out a small item from that day's *Daily Telegraph* - DRUGS BARON UNDER ARREST - 'Philip Sparrowhawk, an Englishman, has been arrested in Bangkok, Thailand, by the US Drugs Enforcement Agency on suspicion of drugs trafficking offences.'

Fuck me, I had heard of newspapers making things up but this was a bit close to home. I knew now I was definitely going to be arrested. The DEA's press office had merely sent out their press release a few hours too early. Confident or what?

Joe and I decided to make ourselves scarce. We left the room and went downstairs to the foyer, where he turned right and I turned left. Before I could register that there were more people in the lobby area than normal, I was pounced on and dragged to the floor. My hands were cuffed behind my back and then I was lifted to my feet. 'What room have you just come from?' screamed an American voice.

Of course they were DEA, all in their black suits and black ties. They rugby tackled Joe to the floor when he made the mistake of hesitating for a second after I was jumped. They then lifted him up and ran with him up to his room, where they quickly found a kilo of grass that I had taken to him two days earlier as a sample. Joe was carted off and I was grabbed by the neck and pushed into the back of a Toyota car. There was really no need for any of the rough stuff, as I

offered no resistance, but adrenalin was clearly running high among the Yanks. We made a short car journey to the 'secret' DEA headquarters, which were less than 100 yards from my office. Some secret HQ: I knew every car, motorbike and face that had been going in and out of there for the previous three years.

As the DEA got me out of their motor they were just yelling and shouting. I had no idea I had fucked so many mothers or sucked so many cocks. The Thai police, who were in on the operation and may well have been the motorbike men, kept shouting at me 'Where is your car, where is your car?'

'I can't remember,' I lied.

The commotion attracted a crowd. A crowd gathers in Bangkok if someone farts loudly, but they especially enjoy road accidents and shootings. They even have a magazine on general sale dedicated to real murders and fatal accidents with colour pictures of the aftermath of such gory incidents. If their photographers miss the action, they re-enact the scene with actors and actresses using tomato sauce. I kid you not.

Inside the DEA building I was photographed again and again. Each time, I shook my head to try and send my glasses flying and each time they pushed them back on my face. They had fallen for it - I wanted them to have pictures with glasses on and not off. Under the identity I was using at the time - that of an Irishman named Daniel Hamrogue - I always wore glasses. Under previous identities, and mainly because I hadn't needed them so much when I was younger, I didn't. The DEA were interested in an Englishman called Philip Sparrowhawk who didn't always wear glasses.

'Where's the briefcase?'

That was a relief: the fact they were asking meant they had not found my car yet. All the evidence, on the Holland deal at least, was in that briefcase. But they did know about

the briefcase. When they kept on and on, I told them to ask the two boys who had been following me.

‘How did you know you were being followed? If you knew you were being followed why did you still go to meet your friend?’

‘I didn’t go to meet anyone. I didn’t worry about being followed because I have done nothing wrong.’ I was beginning to believe my own protestations of innocence.

After this first round of questions they put me back in their car and drove me out to my house. It was not a large house, more like the Thai equivalent of a Wimpey starter home; it was terraced and I had paid the Thai equivalent of around £30,000 for it. In my line of business, flouting your wealth is rather stupid.

Luckily the Thais knocked on the door before the Americans could kick it off its hinges and storm in, guns drawn. I tried to reassure my girlfriend as drawers were upturned and my papers stuffed into bags. They found phone numbers and other bits and pieces, but there was nothing there of any value to them. Finally they gave up and we headed back to DEA headquarters, where I was questioned and shouted at all over again. It was now seven o’clock in the evening and I had been arrested at around ten in the morning. My hands were still cuffed behind me and I had not had a drink, anything to eat or a shit or piss all day. The police now told me that Uncle Joe was already banged up in Klong Prem Central Prison, the small piece of grass found in his room being enough to put him in there immediately.

They were getting nowhere fast with me so we went off on another car ride, this time past the British and American embassies to the Immigration Holding Centre on Saturn Road. I had heard about this place but had never before had the pleasure of visiting it. I was handed over to the Thai authorities and the Americans drove off into the night.

'You Philip Sparrowhawk,' the guard on the desk informed me.

'No, me Daniel Hamrogue,' I replied, sticking with my current identity and the name on the Irish passport I had been using. The Americans wanted Philip Sparrowhawk and had obviously told them who I was. Frankly, the Thais didn't give a shit.

'Why are our American friends so angry with you, Daniel?' The guard was miffed that the Yanks had brought someone in for processing at this time of night. His television flickered away in the corner of his office, competing sound-wise with the hum of the air-conditioning unit. Next to the television was his bed. He had obviously been sleeping in it before my arrival.

I was passed on to another guard, open-shirted and sweating heavily, who led me upstairs. 'Have you been arrested at the airport?' he asked.

At the top of the stairs there were two rooms separated by a narrow landing. These rooms or cells measured about forty feet by sixteen feet. They were concrete up to about four and a half feet and then bars ran the rest of the way to the ceiling. The guard opened the wooden door and shoved me into a sea of bodies. These were the people who *had* been arrested at the airport.

The first thing that hit me was the stench - a sickly cocktail of urine, sweat and shit - and as I looked down I could see the room was full of bodies, people trying to sleep. When I later counted, there were 160 people crammed into that cell and whilst there was slightly more room when everyone stood up, when it was lay-down time the crush was unimaginable. There is a Marx Brothers film where scores of people cram into a tiny room. It was like that but this was no comedy. Dim light came from two fluorescent tubes that were clogged with dead flies and mosquitoes and by this I could see some faces. One was a black face, looking at me as I stood by the door dumbstruck

and hesitant; he was sitting cross-legged with his back against the wall and he beckoned me over. I trod carefully, on tiptoes, my feet finding the odd square inch of concrete floor among the legs, arms, heads and torsos, and crossed the room towards him.

From this squatting vantage point next to my black friend I could survey the room. There were no chairs, no beds, no windows, no nothing. A hole in the concrete floor on the other side of the room was obviously a toilet and there was a smidgen of space around it - not to spare anyone's modesty but because sleeping or standing right next to it would have killed anyone within hours, from the smell alone. Nearby was a cold tap attached to a rusty old pipe. The vast majority of the prisoners, on first glance at least, appeared to be Asian - Burmese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Pakistani and Indian. My neighbour spoke some English and he briefly told me he was a Ghanaian and had been arrested for entering the country with an incorrect visa. That was six months ago. He then fell silent to allow me to digest my new situation.

Not until you have been deprived of it do you realise how important space is to you. In the hierarchy of things you need to survive, it ranks way above sex and not far below food and drink. Think of how claustrophobic you feel when standing on a packed tube train: the doors open and there is clearly no room, but a few more idiots crush in and you are tilting your neck back to breathe in the air as the mackintoshes and briefcases press up against you. Think of enduring that, not for the few minutes between Bank and Waterloo stations, but all the fucking time. Think of the hottest day of the year in England. Think of all those commuters near naked and sweating profusely. Think of all those people deciding to lie down on the floor and try to sleep. Think then of the space in the corner where the doors would open being used for people to go to the toilet. Think of the proximity. Think of the smell. Mind the doors. You're about halfway there now.

I didn't sleep that first night. There were a hundred things racing around my mind and I didn't dare. I feared for my life in that room. But at that point I still saw my predicament as a mere hiccup in this eventful life of mine.

At about six in the morning, arms and legs started to unfold, bollocks were scratched and the hole in the ground became busy as bladders and bowels were emptied. There was a civilised shuffling for space as the cell adjusted to the incremental room now nearly everyone was standing. Tied around and hanging from the bars were the belongings of people who had been apprehended at the airport. The duty-free bags were the giveaway. Most people were dressed in underwear or sarongs and conversations broke out in various Asian dialects. A kettle was lit and soon the air became thick with cigarette smoke.

'Be careful of the Chinese,' whispered the Ghanaian, 'they are the traders in here. If you have money they will sell you anything: tea, bottled water, cigarettes, a knife for protection, weed, smack.'

'What? You can get smack in here?'

'This is Thailand. If you have the money, you can get anything in here.'

At eight o'clock a guard appeared with stacks of metal trays containing portions of rice and cabbage soup. A Cambodian who had become an orderly on account of his two and a half years in this room dished them out, holding a baseball bat just in case there was a rush or some outbreak of disorder at feeding time. This was unlikely, however, as the place was so overcrowded that rushing or even throwing a punch was not really an option. After the meal was finished, the trays were all passed across the room to the tap where they were washed and stacked up again for the guard to take away.

I spotted a white face among the crowd and threaded my way over to speak to him. He was German and had been in prison in Thailand for three years for passing dodgy

travellers' cheques. He had served his time and had been transferred to the Immigration Centre pending his flight home. That was six weeks ago. He didn't have the money for a ticket and until he got that in from somewhere he was going nowhere. He told me that the guy next to him had been in for just over two years because he didn't have the money - the equivalent of about £20 - to pay a fine for having a visa that was 18 days out of date. It was rapidly becoming obvious that the holding centre served no other purpose than to raise money for the holding centre itself, or at least the guards who ran it. There was no question of this being about the containment of undesirables or the gathering of information. As I soon discovered, the only release from here was procured by death or money. I had plenty of the latter, so I was looking forward to getting this little mess straightened out quickly.

After a couple of days my girlfriend tracked me down, although she got no help from the DEA or the Thai police, and she immediately arranged for me to have access to some cash. The first thing I bought was bottled water from the guards; my thirst had become such that I had almost succumbed to drinking from the rusty old tap. I also paid to use a toilet. I had not had a shit now for four or five days, as I could not bring myself to unload in front of all these people. Nowadays TV programmes such as *An Audience with Ken Dodd* or some other celebrity are popular; I was determined not to stage *An Audience with Phil Sparrowhawk's Arsehole*. Getting the shits in this place could also have been fatal. I gave my girlfriend some instructions and hoped the wheels would now be turning to get me out and home.

Before I had been in a week, I witnessed my first suicide. I hadn't noticed the man before. He was 30 feet away. I think he was Vietnamese - one of the so-called boat people. He was an economic refugee, not a criminal, and even if he had

committed some crime it would have been out of desperation not greed. It was late evening and the first thing I noticed was the sound of him tearing his T-shirt into strips and tying the strips together. My immediate thought was that he was going to hang himself but as no one said a word or even gave him a second glance, I figured he must be doing something else. Perhaps he was one of those obsessive-compulsive people who tear bits of paper up all day. Before I could fully grasp what was going on he had tied his 'rope' around the bars and was climbing on the shoulders of the two people either side of him. One of these men was conducting a whispered conversation with the man next to him. The other pulled on a cigarette in a totally detached fashion. I went to move towards them, hardly believing what I was seeing, but the Ghanaian put his hand on my arm and shook his head firmly. The man jumped off his neighbours' shoulders and they moved away, leaving a space around the poor fellow who was now hanging, jerking and spluttering. No one really seemed to be looking. I think they were being polite. This was his private moment. When I asked why no one was cutting him down, I was told that if they did they would leave themselves open to being accused of some sort of foul play. The guards would cut him down in the morning. I soon realised why a space was left below his hanging body. During the night I could see and hear the shit and piss dripping to the floor from the legs of his shorts.

The suicide upset me but didn't seem to perturb anyone else, not even the other Vietnamese who must have known this man. I realised that they must all have become hardened to it, as suicides were commonplace. It was one of the few options open to you in here (the others were to anaesthetise yourself with drugs or go mad) and death was generally an occupational hazard for refugees in this part of the world.

The next day, routine had been resumed and the suicide forgotten, and, with a few shuffles of feet and bottoms, his space had been claimed. A young life had ended with less impact than if a light bulb had popped in a family sitting room in Maidstone. I doubt if the man had a birth certificate. I'm sure he didn't get a death certificate. He would not have been travelling on his real name. But someone, somewhere must have known him, must have loved, held and nurtured him. I doubted if they would ever get to know of his fate.

Although the guards didn't fully enter the room to deposit the food, which came again (same menu) at four in the afternoon, they were forever in and out bringing in the various goodies that the inmates had ordered. Newspapers and books were in demand, as were sweets and other simple pleasures. The only time I saw the guards dish out violence was to prisoners who had not paid for their orders. This could be vicious, but all they really wanted to do was earn and have a quiet life - the Thais were never into violence for violence's sake.

My girlfriend's visits had made my life more tolerable almost immediately. The guards viewed me as a possible source of income as opposed to a chore and my status among the prisoners was immediately elevated. After my girlfriend dropped the Baht equivalent of £1,000 on them, the guards became positively warm towards me and I was given some blankets and a prized space up against the wall. I knew enough Thai to know that they were also warning other inmates to treat me well. One day I had a craving for Kentucky Fried Chicken, actually I had a craving for anything non-soup or rice-based, but knew if my girlfriend brought me one in I was risking a riot. So I told her to bring 40 boxes, which fed just about everyone something and raised my standing further. We didn't share any with the Chinese, as they'd only sell it on. A few days later we did the same with pizza. I bought water, sweets, newspapers and books, and distributed them as widely as I could. The guards loved

me and so did everyone else. Within a couple of weeks I was being treated like a king. Of course, this had a downside, which was that the guards were probably not too keen for me to move on. I asked on several occasions when I was going to be let out but they just said nothing or 'Soon, soon.' I had no visits from the British Embassy but I couldn't really complain about that too much when I was insisting to anyone who enquired that I was Irish.

The Ghanaian became my closest friend in the centre and I called him James, as in James Garner (Ghana), the Hollywood actor. This was easier for me to remember than his real name. I was able to direct some financial assistance on the outside to his visa problem and soon he was released. He was very grateful and, although I was pleased to be able to help at least one of the wretched people in there, I was sorry to see him go. At the same time, I heard that Uncle Joe had been freed on bail and had promptly jumped it. The \$20,000 that had found its way to someone in a position of power would have helped his bail application considerably. I was glad for him too, but couldn't help feeling jealous and slightly resentful. That's what happens when you are in prison.

Many a night I would sit cross-legged and stare up at the sky through the bars. There wasn't much else to do. Sometimes you could see the moon. This particular night it was like a clipped fingernail flicked onto a black velvet canvas. The guards opened the doors and called me over to them to save themselves trampling across the sleeping bodies. It was ten o' clock and I was immediately alarmed - in Thailand normal stuff didn't take place at night. I was handed over to two Thais in crisp dark suits who promptly handcuffed me and took me downstairs and outside to a waiting car where two more smartly dressed Thais were waiting. We sped away from the Immigration Centre and out onto the motorway, following the signs for the airport. As Thais often do, they assumed I could not speak or