

# WeShall Overcome

A Novel

Abbie Johnson Taylor

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## CHAPTER 1

The demonstrators sang as they stood blocking the entrance to the courthouse in the gathering dusk of a chilly March evening. Lisa clutched her long white cane in her right hand and a small sign in her left hand and sang with them. For the past few months, she and her friend Joan Ferrin were involved with a group of peace activists trying to prevent the war with Iraq. They participated in marches and meetings where people spoke out against the war. However, their efforts were futile because on this day, the conflict was beginning. The group organized this gathering at the last minute. Since they wanted to get the public's attention but wanted to disrupt the proceedings at the courthouse as little as possible, they decided to hold their gathering in the early evening after the courthouse closed for the day and while it was still light so people driving by could see them. They stood at the entrance nearest the busy main street, and their voices rose over the sound of traffic.

"All right, folks, listen up," said a voice amplified by a bull horn. "You have five minutes to clear out or you'll all be arrested for civil disobedience."

Startled, Lisa dropped her sign and began making her way through the crowd, holding her cane diagonally in front of her. Despite her limited vision, she could see people moving aside to let her pass. Ahead of her, she glimpsed the busy intersection and heard the traffic. "Lisa, what are you doing?" Joan called.

Lisa turned toward the sound of her friend's voice and said, "I'm not going to jail." She broke free of the crowd and headed for the intersection. She paused at the corner, waiting for the light to change. Although she could see colors, she could not make out traffic lights. So she could only determine whether the light was green or red by observing the flow of traffic.

Running footsteps sounded behind her. "Hey, can you stop a minute?" a male voice asked. "I'm with the Sheridan Press, and I want to know why you're running away."

Her panic rising, Lisa turned to the man and said, "Just let me get far enough away so they don't arrest me, okay?"

She turned toward the street, and noticing that it was safe to cross, she dashed to the other side, the tip of her cane sweeping from side to side in front of her. When she reached the opposite curb, she paused and turned to the reporter who was hurrying after her. She hoped she was far enough away that she would not be perceived as one of the demonstrators.

“Boy, for someone who can’t see, you sure move fast,” said the reporter, panting and taking a notebook and pen from his pocket.

Lisa forgot about the demonstration and the threat of arrest as she was seized by an instinct to educate this reporter about her visual impairment and her accomplishments despite the disability. “I have some vision,” she said. “I can see people, places, and objects if they’re close enough, but I don’t always recognize people by their faces. Most of the time, I have to go by voices. I can also read with the help of a closed-circuit television reading system that magnifies the print. As a matter of fact, that’s how I read your paper.”

“That’s interesting,” said the reporter, scribbling in his notebook. “Do you use a computer, too?”

“Yes,” Lisa answered. “I use one at home and at work. Both have screen readers that read the text aloud to me in synthetic speech and help me navigate without using a mouse.”

“And where do you work?” the reporter asked.

“I work with my father, Brad Taylor,” Lisa answered. “He owns Taylor Novelty, a company that sells and services coin-operated machines to restaurants and other businesses in Sheridan, Buffalo, Gillette, and other towns in this area.”

“Oh, yeah,” the reporter said. “I believe you guys do our candy machine at the office. That reminds me. Did anyone from there call you today about that machine? It took my fifty cents but didn’t give me a candy bar.”

“No, but I’ll make sure someone gets there tomorrow,” Lisa said.

“So what kind of work do you do with this company?” the reporter asked.

“I do the books and keep track of all the cigarettes, junk food, coffee, cocoa, and jukebox records that go into those machines,” Lisa said.

“You use the computer to do all that?” the reporter asked.

“Most of it,” Lisa answered. “I also have a closed-circuit television reading system there that I use to read the labels on all the merchandise. I then label everything in Braille so I can find it easily.”

“By the way, I don’t think I caught your name,” the reporter said.

Before she could answer, she heard the amplified voice that earlier announced the demonstrators’ impending arrest and was surprised that it was still audible from across the street, despite the noise of the traffic. “All right, folks, you’re all under arrest.” She heard the sound of approaching sirens.

“It looks like the police are coming,” said the reporter. The gathering dusk, the sound of the sirens growing closer and closer, and the amplified voice across the street reminded her why she was there, and she turned to leave. “Wait,” said the reporter. “You haven’t told me why you’re running away, why you don’t want to be arrested.”

“I also haven’t told you my name,” she said, turning back to the reporter and trying to keep her voice calm. “My name is Lisa Taylor, and although I am opposed to the war with Iraq, I don’t think the cause is worth going to jail. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get home before it gets too dark for me to see.”

“You’re scared,” the reporter said as she turned to leave.

“What do you mean?” Lisa asked, turning back.

“You’re afraid of going to jail,” the reporter answered.

“Of course I’m afraid of going to jail,” Lisa said. “But I’m more afraid of losing my job, which could happen if I’m arrested.”

Lisa knew this was a lie. Her father didn’t approve of the war with Iraq any more than she did. If she were arrested, he’d bail her out and then pat her on the knee and tell her how proud he was of his little girl for standing up for a cause. But she wasn’t about to tell the reporter that. However, his next words made her realize that he saw right through her.

“Look, I’ve met your dad. He seems to be a real nice guy, not the sort of father who would fire his own daughter. But a lot of those people across the street are not lucky enough to have employers who understand something like this, and I don’t see any of them running away. Could your visual impairment have something to do with it?”

Exasperated, Lisa turned and fled along the sidewalk. In the distance, the wail of police sirens was replaced by the screech of brakes as the squad cars arrived at their destination. Lisa didn’t look back, not until she reached the safety of her apartment building only a few blocks away.

With a trembling hand, she inserted her security card into the slot. As the door swung open, relief flooded through her when she noticed that the lobby was deserted. The building where Lisa lived was a close-knit community. If any of her neighbors saw her in her shaken state, they would have been concerned, and she was in no mood to make any explanations. She folded her cane and tucked it under her arm since she didn’t use it in the building. She retrieved her mail and pressed the button for the elevator. Most of the time, she used the stairs, but this evening she didn’t think she could climb them. As she waited for the elevator, she took several deep breaths to calm herself.

The thought of going to jail always scared her, ever since she was twelve and her younger brother Hank was ten. Hank and some friends were playing with matches near an abandoned shack which ignited. The police picked up Hank and his friends on suspicion of arson. Hank told Lisa he was handcuffed and tossed into a police car, and when they got to the station, they threw him into a jail cell. She realized later in life that Hank probably fabricated most of the story just to scare his big sister, which he enjoyed doing from time to time. But even now, the thought of being arrested frightened her.

As the doors to the elevator opened, Lisa was relieved to find that it was empty. When she reached her apartment and inserted her key into the lock, the phone rang. As she entered, she noticed that the incoming number her talking Caller ID unit announced was that of Hank who now lived with his wife in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and worked at the national laboratory as a physicist. She stopped shaking as she deposited her keys, her cane, and her mail and lifted the receiver.

“Hi,” she said after her brother greeted her. “I’ve just been thinking about you.” She related the details of that evening, from the gathering in front of the courthouse, to the announcement that they would all be arrested if they didn’t leave. She also told him about her flight from the area and interview with the reporter.

“Wow,” Hank said after she finished. “You know, I’ve always regretted telling you that crazy story about when I was picked up for arson at age ten. It really wasn’t all that bad. We weren’t handcuffed, and it was actually Dad’s idea that I be put in the cell. I remember that there

was a rotten peanut butter sandwich and a couple of bunk beds. I'm assuming that you ran away tonight because of what I told you years ago."

"Yes," she said as she flopped onto the couch. "There's supposed to be another march downtown in a couple of days, but I suppose if everybody's still in jail by that time, it won't happen."

The siblings talked for a while longer. Hank's wife Sharon was expecting their first child soon, and he brought Lisa up to date on how she was. They finally said goodbye.

As Lisa replaced the receiver, the phone rang a second time. The Caller ID announced the number of her father's cell phone. "Hi, honey," he said with a little laugh.

"Hi, yourself," Lisa said. "What's so funny?"

"I'm in the parking lot of the police station. I heard on the radio that your peacemakers group had been arrested for blocking the entrance to the courthouse so I went to bail you out. And of course, you weren't there," her father said with a chuckle.

"I'm glad you find that amusing," Lisa said with a hint of irritation in her voice. "But who do you think would be running the business if I were in jail?"

"Lisa, you and I both know that I ran this company for years before you even took an interest in it," her father said. "I could have managed for a time if I had to. I did it when you went to camp every summer and those rare times when you were sick."

"I know," Lisa said. "But having the flu or taking a vacation is one thing. This time, I just didn't feel right leaving you with the month ending and all those bills to pay and our taxes to file."

"Honey, something tells me that's not the reason you ran away," her father said. "I talked to Steve Mathis. He's the editor of the paper, and he was covering the event. He said he got that impression, too."

"He was the one who interviewed me?" Lisa asked.

"Yep, and he says he's going to write an editorial about you," said her father.

"Oh, great!" Lisa said. "That's just what I need, what our company needs right now, bad publicity."

"Hold on," her father said. "Do you really think that Steve is stupid enough to write bad things about a business that supplies his reporters with all the coffee and junk food they need and only takes twenty percent of the profits? He just wants to write an article about you and how you manage with your visual impairment. He thinks it's admirable that you even showed up. There aren't a lot of news stories about disabled people doing things like that. When I told him about how Hank scared you with his bogus arrest story, he said he completely understood."

"You told him about Hank committing arson at age ten?" Lisa laughed.

"Sweetheart, Hank is miles away and this happened years ago," her father said. "I don't think this will tarnish his image. By the way, I wouldn't have been able to bail you out anyway. They're holding all the demonstrators overnight, and they'll have bail hearings in the morning."

"You see," she said. "That would have made me late to work, and I would have been behind. That reminds me. Did Steve tell you about the candy machine?"

"Yes," her father said. "There's nothing I can do about it now. The Press office is closed. But I'll go down there first thing in the morning and take care of it. Now, I'm going to head on home, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, Dad," Lisa said and after replacing the receiver, she collapsed onto the couch, exhausted.