

# Introduction

## New York City

**I**N FIVE, FOUR, THREE, TWO . . .” This wasn’t the first time a floor director had ever counted me down, but it was the first time I ever choked back tears. It was August 25, 2006, my first on-camera studio open for the CBS News broadcast *60 Minutes*. Moments earlier I’d been in makeup with famed artist Riccie Johnson. She’d done up the likes of Mike Wallace, Harry Reasoner, Morley Safer, Dan Rather, Ed Bradley, Lesley Stahl, Steve Kroft, and every other big-name correspondent who ever worked for *60 Minutes*. And the Beatles. And now she was putting powder on *me*.

Executive Producer Jeff Fager poked his head in the dressing room, “Good luck, Brotha! You’ve come a long way to get here. You’ve earned it.” I think Jeff was talking about my

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ten years of covering hurricanes, tornadoes, politics, the September 11 disaster, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and every other sort of story for *CBS News* during those years.

If he only knew. My mind flashed back to elementary school, when a therapist had informed my mother, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Pitts, your son is functionally illiterate. He cannot read.”

Months earlier, another so-called expert had suggested I was mentally retarded. Perhaps there was a “special needs” program right for me. Here I was some three decades later sitting in the “special” chair of the most revered show in the history of broadcast news. Musicians dream of playing Carnegie Hall, astronauts work a lifetime to take their first mission in space, and every broadcast journalist worth his or her salt dreams of *60 Minutes*.

Engineers generally keep television studios icy cold to prevent the equipment from overheating. The *60 Minutes* studio is no different. But in this age of high-tech sets with massive video walls and graphic trickery, Studio 33, where *60 Minutes* is taped, looks more like a throwback. You can almost smell the cigar smoke from decades past. Black-covered walls. Bright lights hanging from the ceiling. There’s one camera and one chair. As a correspondent, you sit in the chair, cross your legs, look into the camera, and tell a story.

“Take two. In three, two, one!”

Seven takes later I finally recorded one that everybody liked. It took a while—not so much to settle my nerves as to get everyone settled in that one chair. Sitting with me were my mother, Clarice Pitts; my grandmother, Roberta Mae Walden; my sister, Sandra; and my brother, Mac. We had

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made the journey as a family, with the help of a few friends and even a few strangers.

What an overwhelming feeling it was and the symbolism was not lost on me.

That afternoon, to all who could see, I was seated alone. But I knew better. Some thirty-seven years before I would ever hear the phrase “Step Out on Nothing,” God was writing those words to cover my life. How many times has each of us been in a difficult place and thought we were alone? Standing on nothing. Perhaps it is only in the empty space of those moments we can truly feel God’s breath at our necks. His hands beneath our feet. Step out on nothing? Yes. Step out on faith.

So where did I get the title for this book? *Step Out on Nothing*. What does it mean and how does it fit into my life? Most important, how do you find the courage to try it?

I first heard those fateful words on a Sunday in March of 2007, Women’s Day at St. Paul Baptist Church in Montclair, New Jersey. My wife was excited. She’d helped with the weekend program. Me, not so much. As usual I was running late for service and she was getting annoyed. We arrived at church in time. The place was packed. Women all dressed in white and black. The guest preacher that morning was Reverend Benita Lewis. She began her sermon by talking about the pain women will endure to be beautiful. She talked about pedicures, high-heeled shoes, and women’s sore feet. I thought to myself, *This is going to be a long service*. Nothing here for me. And it got worse. She moved from pedicures to massages and spa treatments. Body wraps to skin treatments. At that point I was drifting away. It felt as if we’d been in

church for hours. But Reverend Lewis was just warming up, and I soon discovered that she wasn't speaking only to the women in the congregation. She was telling all of us about overcoming pain and obstacles in our paths. She was talking about a belief in God, a faith so strong that anything is possible. Then Reverend Lewis uttered four words that took my breath away. "Step out on nothing." She encouraged the congregation to "step out on faith" in this journey we call life. To put your life and its challenges in God's hands. To believe in a power greater than yourself.

Step out . . . on nothing . . .

In the time it takes to say those four words, a lifetime flashed before me. She was speaking about my life. How had I overcome my childhood inability to read when I was nearly a teenager? It was my mother stepping out on nothing, despite the doubts she must have had during the nights around the kitchen table when I "just wasn't getting it."

And how do you explain an inner-city kid who stuttered until he was twenty years old becoming a network television news correspondent? Let's start with a college professor who didn't even know my name. She stepped out on nothing and believed in a young man who didn't believe in himself.

Then there's Peter Holthe: a stranger. A college classmate from Minnetonka, Minnesota. "Why's your vocabulary so limited?" he asked. He stayed around to find out why and helped expand it.

Those Franciscan Friars at Archbishop Curley High School in Baltimore, Maryland, who heard I was in a gospel choir at a church across town. These were white men who'd never ventured into a black neighborhood or set foot in a Baptist

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church. They too stepped out on nothing, figuring that being supportive of one of their students after hours might actually make a difference in his life.

We all have those defining moments in our lives. Moments of great joy. Moments of unspeakable sadness and fear. We usually think we're alone. But if we look into the corners of our memories, we'll find them—those people who had faith in us. Those times when a grace beyond earthly understanding touches us.

This is a story of those times. Those people. And the lessons they taught me. We've all had such people in our lives. If not, it's time to find them.

And for me, this story is my “step out on nothing,” revealing a childhood shame that I've hidden from all but those who are closest to me, in hopes that my leap of faith will inspire some young child, or even an adult, who is living with a secret. It took me years to discover my shame was actually a source of strength.



## ONE

# Mustard Seed Faith—With It You Can Move Mountains

Because you have so little faith, I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

—Matthew 17:20

### 1969 Baltimore

**A**T AGE NINE I was a fourth-grader in a Catholic school, and the only whore I had ever heard of was the lady in the Bible. That was until one day when, dressed in my school uniform of blue pants, white shirt, and gray and blue striped tie, my mom picked me up and we set out on one of the defining adventures of my young life.

“Get in the car! We’re going to that whore’s house!”

It couldn’t have been more than a ten-minute ride. My mother, who loves to talk, never said a word. We drove up on a busy street lined with row houses, each tipped with Baltimore’s famed three-marble steps. I’ve never considered my mom an athlete, but that day she pushed at the driver’s side

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door like a sprinter leaping off the starting block and quickly made her way to a house with a narrow door and a small diamond-shaped window. She rang the doorbell several times. A pretty woman with long curly brown hair finally answered the door. I was struck by how much she resembled my mother.

“Tell my husband to come out here,” my mother yelled.

The woman answered, “I don’t know what you’re talking about” and slammed the door.

I could see the rage building in my mother’s fists and across her face. She backed off the steps and screamed toward a window on the second floor,

“William Pitts! You son of a bitch! Bring your ass outside right now!”

There was dead silence. So she said it again. Louder. If no one inside that house could hear her, the neighbors did. People on the street stopped moving; others started coming out of their homes. My mom had an audience. I stood near the car, paralyzed by shame. Figuring it was her message and not her volume, my mother came up with a new line.

“William Pitts! You son of a bitch! You come outside right now or I will set your car on fire!”

He apparently heard her that time. Much to my surprise, my father, dressed only in his pants and undershirt, dashed out of that house as my mother made her way to his car. She ordered me to move away from her car and get into my father’s car. I did. My father was barefoot, and he slipped as he approached my mother. She picked up a brick and took dead aim at my father’s head. She missed. He ran to the other side of his car. She retrieved the brick and tried again. She missed. He ran. My parents repeated their version of domestic dodge

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ball at least a half dozen times. It must have seemed like a game to the gallery of people who watched and laughed. I never said a word. In the front passenger seat of my father's car, I kept my eyes straight ahead. I didn't want to watch, though I couldn't help but hear. My parents were fighting again, and this time in public.

Eventually, my father saw an opening and jumped into the driver's seat of his car. Fumbling for his keys, he failed to close the door. My mother jumped on top of him. Cursing and scratching at his eyes and face, she seemed determined to kill him. I could see her fingers inside his mouth. Somehow my father's head ended up in my lap. The scratches on his face began to bleed onto my white shirt. For the first time since my mother picked me up from school, I spoke. Terrified, I actually screamed.

“Why! What did I do? Wha-wa-wa-wa-wut!”

I'm sure I had more to say, but I got stuck on the word *what*. Almost from the time I could speak, I stuttered. It seemed to get worse when I was frightened or nervous. Sitting in my dad's car with my parents' weight and their problems pressed against me, I stuttered and cried. It seemed odd to me at that moment, but as quickly and violently as my parents began fighting, they stopped. I guess it was my mother who first noticed the blood splattered across my face and soaked through my shirt. She thought I was bleeding. In that instant, the temperature cooled in the car. It had been so hot. My parents' body heat had caused the three of us to sweat. Fearing they had injured me, my parents tried to console me. But once they stopped fighting, I did what I always seemed to do. I put on my mask. I closed my mouth and pretended everything was all right.

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I was used to this—there had been a lot of secrets in our house. My father had been hiding his infidelity. Both parents were putting a good face on marital strife for their family and friends. You see, almost from the time Clarice and William Pitts met, he was unfaithful. Women on our street, in church, those he'd meet driving a cab, and the woman who would eventually bear him a child out of wedlock. I have only known her as Miss Donna. Clarice may have despised the woman, but if ever her name came up in front of the children, she was Miss Donna. The car ride was a tortured awakening for me, but it was just the beginning. The picture our family showed the outside world was beginning to unravel, and when all our secrets began to spill into the open, on the street, in the classroom, and in our church, none of our lives would ever be the same.

My mother was accustomed to hard times. Clarice Pitts was a handsome woman, with thick strong hands, a square jaw, cold gray eyes, and a love for her children bordering on obsession. Her philosophy was always: "If you work hard and pray hard and treat people right, good things will happen." That was her philosophy. Unfortunately, that was not her life.

Clarice was the second of seven children born in a shotgun house in the segregated South of Apex, North Carolina, on January 1, 1934. By mistake, the doctor wrote Clarence Walden on her birth certificate, and until the age of twelve, when she went for her Social Security card, the world thought my mother was a man. Truth be told, for three-quarters of a century, she's been tougher than most men you'd meet. Her father, Luther Walden, was by all accounts a good provider

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and a bad drinker. He'd work the farm weekdays, work the bottle weekends. Her mother, Roberta Mae, was both sweet and strong. Friends nicknamed her Señorita because she was always the life of the party, even after back-breaking work. All the kids adored their mother and feared their father. On more than a few occasions, after he'd been drinking all day, her father would beat his wife and chase the children into the woods.

At sixteen, Clarice thought marriage would be better than living at home, where she was afraid to go to sleep at night when her father had been drinking. So she married a man nearly twice her age (he was twenty-nine), and they had one child, my sister, Sandra Jeannette Austin. People thought that since Clarice married a man so much older she would have a ton of babies. But she was never one to conform to others' expectations. She promised herself never to have more children than she could care for, or a husband that she couldn't tolerate. He never raised his hand to her. He did, however, have a habit of raising a liquor bottle to his mouth. She divorced him three years later, and by the mid-1950s she and my sister had started a new life in Baltimore, Maryland, which held the promise of a better education and a better job than was available to her in the South.

She finally thought life had given her a break when she met William Archie Pitts. They met in night school. "He was a real flirt, but smart," she said. In 1958 William A. Pitts could have been Nat King Cole's taller younger brother. He was jet black with broad shoulders; his uniform of choice a dark suit, dark tie, crisp white shirt, a white cotton pocket-square, and polished shoes. He dressed like a preacher, spoke

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like a hustler, and worked as a butcher. Clarice looked good on his arm and liked being there even more. He was ebony. She was ivory, or as Southerners said back then, she was “high yellow.” My father had been married once before as well. His first wife died in childbirth, and he was raising their son on his own.

After a whirlwind romance of steamed crabs on paper tablecloths and dances at the local Mason lodge, the two married. A short time later, I was born on October 21, 1960. There was no great family heritage or biblical attachment associated with my name. They chose my name out of a baby book. My mother simply liked the sound of it. One of the few indulgences of her life in the early 1960s was dressing her baby boy like John F. Kennedy Jr. She kept me in short pants as long as she could. She finally relented when I started high school. Just kidding. But to me it certainly felt as if she held on until the last possible moment.

Life held great promise for William and Clarice Pitts in the 1960s. The year after I was born, Clarice finished high school and later graduated college the year before my sister earned her first of several degrees. She worked in a few different sewing factories in Baltimore. She took on side jobs making hats for women at church and around the city. Both of my parents believed God had given them a second chance. Almost instantly William and Clarice Pitts had a family: two boys and a daughter. My parents bought their first and only home together at 2702 East Federal Street.

Outsiders knew my hometown as just Baltimore, but if you grew up there, there were actually two Baltimores; East Baltimore and West Baltimore. And the side of the city you

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lived on said as much about you as your last name or your parents' income. East Baltimore was predominantly blue collar, made up mostly of cement, ethnic neighborhoods, and tough-minded people. Most people I knew worked with their hands and worked hard for their money. You loved family, your faith, the Colts, and the Orioles. In 1969 my world centered on the 2700 block of East Federal Street. Ten blocks of red brick row houses, trimmed with aluminum siding. Decent people kept their furniture covered in plastic. Each house had a patch of grass out front. To call it a lawn would be too generous. The yards on East Federal were narrow and long, like the hood of the Buick Electric 225 my father drove. Those in the know called that model car a Deuce and a Quarter. Ours was a neighborhood on the shy side of working class. Like I said, my father was a meat cutter at the local meat plant. My mother was a seamstress at the London Fog coat factory. My sister was about to graduate from high school. Big hair. Bigger personality. I idolized her. My brother was sixteen. We had the typical big brother–little brother relationship: we hated each other. Born William MacLauren, we've always called him Mac as in MacLauren, but it could have stood for Mack truck. Not surprisingly, he grew up and became a truck driver. Even as a boy, he was built like a man, stronger than most, with a quiet demeanor that shouted "Fool with me at your own risk." He and Clarice Pitts were not blood relatives; however, they'd always shared a fighter's heart and a silent understanding that the world had somehow abandoned them. They would always have each other.

My nickname in the neighborhood was Pickle. I despised that name, but it seemed to fit. You know the big kid in the

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neighborhood? That wasn't me. I was thin as a coarack, my head shaped like a rump roast covered in freckles. We were a Pepsi family, but my glasses resembled Coke bottles. I was shy out of necessity. But whatever my life lacked in 1969, football filled the void. I loved Johnny Unitas, John Mackey, and the Baltimore Colts. I never actually went to a game. I guess we couldn't afford it. But no kid in the stands ever adored that team more than I did.

On Federal Street, the Pitts kids had a reputation: God-fearing, hard-working, and polite. Next to perhaps breathing, few things have meant more to my mother than good manners. She'd often remark, when I was very young, and with great conviction and innocence, "If you never learn to read and write, you *will* be polite and work hard." Most days, that was enough. Back in North Carolina, the only reading materials around my grandmother's home were the Bible and *Ebony* magazine. My parents did one better with the Bible, *Ebony*, and *Jet*. My father read the newspaper. My mother had her schoolbooks, but reading and pleasure rarely shared the same space in our house. Neither one of my parents ever read to me, as best I can recall. We had a roof over our heads, food on the table, and church every Sunday. When my mother compared our lives to her childhood—in which she and some of her siblings actually slept in the woods on more than a few nights, terrified that their father would come home in a drunken rage and beat them—she felt that her children had it good.

Around the house, my mother was the enforcer, dishing out the discipline in our family. My father was the fun-loving life of the party and primary breadwinner. As long as I can

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remember, relatives from across the country (mostly the South) would call our home, seeking my mother's counsel. When there was trouble, people called Clarice. My dad loved cooking, telling stories, and occasionally, if encouraged, he would sing songs. The same relatives who often called my mom for advice would flock to our house annually to enjoy those times when my dad would cook their favorite foods, retell their favorite stories, and pour their favorite drinks. At some point in the evening, my mother would end up in my dad's lap, and neighbors could hear the laughter from our home pouring out onto the sidewalk. Those were the good days.

For better or worse, there was structure or, at the very least, a routine in the first years of my life. My mother made my brother and me get haircuts every Saturday. We enjoyed one style: The number one. The skinny. And my mother's favorite, "Cut it close." Food was part of the ritual too. We'd have pot roast for Sunday dinner. Leftovers on Monday, fried chicken on Tuesday, pork chops Wednesday, liver on Thursday (I hated liver, so I got salisbury steak), fish sticks on Friday, and "Go for yourself" on Saturday. But mealtime was often the flashpoint for the anger and bitterness that began to consume my parents' marriage. Their fight scene on the street was a rarity, but Fight Night at the Dinner Table, as the kids called it, was a regular feature. Meals always started with a prayer, "Heavenly Father, thank you for the food we're about to receive . . .," and often ended early.

The fight usually started with very little warning, either my mother's sudden silence or my father's sarcasm. One night we were having fried pork chops (so it had to have been a

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Wednesday). Pork chops were my favorite, with mashed potatoes and cabbage on the side, and blue Kool-Aid (that's grape to the uninitiated). The sounds of silverware against plates and light conversation filled the air. Then came the look. We all caught it at different times. My mother was staring a hole through my father's head. It sounded like she dropped her fork from the ceiling, but it actually fell no more than three inches from her hand to her plate. My dad gave his usual response soaked in innocence: "What?"

He didn't realize my mother had been listening on the phone in our kitchen when he had called Miss Donna from an upstairs phone to see how their son, Myron, was doing. Yes, I said their *son*. I think my mother was actually willing to forgive his child by another woman several years after my birth. But his name being so close to mine (Byron/Myron) was what seemed to break her heart and sometimes her spirit. At this point during dinner, however, she wasn't just broken—she was angry. First went her plate. Aimed at his head. And then her coffee cup. Then my plate. Followed rapid-fire by Mac's and Sandra's dinner plates.

"Calm down, Momma!" Sandra, the ring announcer, screamed.

Mac, always the referee, stood up to make sure no one went for a knife or scissors. Me? I just sat there. You ever notice at a prizefight, the people with the best seats don't move a lot? They're spellbound by the action in the ring. That was me at the kitchen table: left side, center seat between my parents, my brother and sister on the other side. That night my mother was determined, if not accurate. Four feet away, four tries, but my mother never hit my father

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once. Granted he was bobbing and weaving the whole time, like Cassius Clay dodging a Sonny Liston jab. As my father dodged plates and coffee cups, he would call my mother Sweetie. Her name of choice for him was Son of a Bitch. Except for a few potatoes in his hair, he got away without a scratch. The plates and the wallpaper didn't fare as well. With coffee-stained walls and cabinets full of chipped plates and broken utensils, I presumed every family had some variation on the same theme. And as quickly as it started, the fight was over. My father backpedaled to another room. My mother retreated to the comfort of her sewing machine. I cleared the table. My sister washed dishes. My brother dried them. We finished our homework. I was in bed by 8:30 P.M.

For all their bickering, Clarice and William Pitts always worked hard. They always believed in the power of prayer, the goodness of God's grace, and the importance of faith. That partially explains why my mother stayed married as long as she did. For as long as I can remember, she's worn a tiny mustard seed encased in a small plastic ball on a chain around her neck. The story of the mustard seed in the Bible has always given her great comfort.

Matthew 17:20: "Because you have so little faith, I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

It's a belief that anything's possible if one's willing to work hard enough, if one's faith runs deep enough. I think she still believed in her marriage long after it was over. Her

first answer to every difficult situation was always the same: “Did you pray yet?” In the midst of any crisis, whether at the beginning, the middle, or the end, my mother always turned to prayer. That night—after my parents fought on the street and my father bled inside his car on my lap, outside his girlfriend’s house, where strangers looked on and laughed, in a neighborhood I’d never seen before but have never forgotten—my mother drove me home and we prayed.

We never said a word in the car on the way home. My mother had climbed off my father, held my hand, and scooted me into her car first. We went home in silence. I ate dinner in those same bloody clothes. I washed my hands but not my face. No one seemed to notice. The tension that evening had exhausted everyone. We all headed for bed early.

“Go take off those clothes and leave them outside your door,” my mother told me. “Call me when you’ve got your pajamas on.”

I did. I could hear her walking up the stairs. Slow and deliberate, as if she was carrying a heavy load. Earlier, back in my father’s car, when I glanced into my mother’s gray eyes, they were narrow and mean. Now at home, in my room, her eyes were soft around the edges and sad. My mother was not the crying type. She wasn’t crying then. But she was sad. I could see it in the slump of her shoulders. It was written across her face.

“You okay?” she asked me. Her tone now was 180 degrees lighter than a few hours ago, when she had picked me up from school.

“What happened between me and your father had nothing to do with you,” she said. “I wish we could wash away

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memories as easily as we can wash clothes,” she added. Then she took my hands, closed her eyes, and touched her head to mine and started to pray. It’s the way I’ve prayed ever since.

“Dear wise and almighty God, we come to you as humbly as we know how, just to say thank you, Lord. Thank you for blessings seen and unseen. Thank you, Lord, for our family, our friends, and even our enemies. Thank you, Lord, for the bad days, for they help us to better appreciate the good ones. Please, Lord, mend us where we are broken. Make us strong where we are weak. Give us, Lord, the faith to believe our tomorrow will be brighter than our yesterday. Hold us, Lord. Keep us in the palms of Your hands. Give us faith to keep holding on. These and all other blessings we ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.”

I opened my eyes to her familiar smile. We’re not a teeth-smiling family—more grinners. But her grin promised better days were ahead. She hugged me. Tucked me in. Said good night. I remember expecting an apology before she left the room. After the day I’d had? Please! But *sorry* is not a word my mother used very often. The suggestion was, *sorry* indicated regret. With faith, why have regrets? Everything happens for a reason, for the good. Perhaps understanding would come by and by. As I listened to my mother’s footsteps beyond my door, I suddenly felt a peace. The clanking of our old electric fan in the window even had a pleasant melody to it. On the surface, not a damn thing good had happened to me that day. But at that moment, after my mother’s prayers, all I could think about was rejoicing in the notion that I was now on the other side of a difficult moment.