

# “Don’t Let Me Fall”

SONG BY VICKI RANDLE



## SONGWRITER'S STATEMENT >

“What a revelation to find oneself mirrored in the pages of a book! In McBride's memoir was a familiar landscape of life details: a huge unruly bi-racial family, the lonely shame of sexual abuse, and wrestling with God for answers. I set out to write their story into song, and so doing, wrote my own.”  
Vicki Randle

## LYRICS >

My kid sister was scrawny, but fearless and tough  
She followed me around like a motherless pup  
So I let her tag along while we tightrope walked  
The backyard fences all along the block

I jumped onto an old shed roof and sunk through to my knees  
I yelled at her to run for help, but instead she scrambled next to me  
She clawed and pulled with all her might, even though she knew  
That if that rotten roof gave way, that she was going too

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall  
You got a hold of my hand, please  
Don't let go

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall  
I put my faith in you  
Don't let go

Building a treehouse fort from scavenged wood we found  
Rust on the railroad tracks staining my shoes brown

I believed in everything. I won at tag and spelling bees  
And at night I bowed my head  
And said my prayers on skinned-up knees

Bogeymen and monsters were the only things to fear  
Pulling all the sheets up tight will make them disappear

That was before the little wide-eyed girl—  
Pleas, that no one heard—  
He pulled her down onto his lap whispering  
"Don't you say a word"

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall  
You got a hold of my hand, please  
Don't let go

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**... LYRICS >**

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall  
I put my faith in you  
Don't let go

They said God was the father, standing sentry in the sky  
I know he breaks the baby bird shells so they can open up  
their eyes

And God breathes in the ocean  
He looks like sunrays through the clouds  
God smells like the color of air and tastes like snowflakes  
in your mouth

And God will never leave me, He'd never let me drown  
Then He opened up the floodgates  
And the world rushed in and knocked me down

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall  
You got a hold of my hand, please  
Don't let go

Don't let me fall, don't let me fall  
I put my faith in you  
Don't let go

**SOURCE >**

**THE COLOR OF WATER BY JAMES MCBRIDE**

As a boy in Brooklyn's Red Hook projects, James McBride knew his mother was different. But when he asked about it, she'd simply say, "I'm light-skinned." Later he wondered if he was different too, and asked his mother if he was black or white. "You're a human being!" she snapped. And when James asked what color God was, she told him, "God is the color of water." As an adult, McBride finally persuaded his mother to tell her story—the story of a rabbi's daughter, born in Poland and married in the South, who fled to Harlem, married a black man, founded a Baptist church, and put twelve children through college. *The Color of Water* is James McBride's tribute to his remarkable, eccentric, determined mother—and an eloquent exploration of what family really means.

**MUSIC >**

A guitar and one-note organ part lay a path for this song to travel down. A small voice comes out, bringing us immediately to a tight scared place where this song lives at first. There's a great resolve though, of survival and faith that comes with the swell of music that arrives in the first chorus. One of the featured instruments in the song is an organ, so familiar to many of us as an instrument used in church. It brings us into the familiar and clashes powerfully with lyrics that deal with difficult topics like incest. This song is arranged to explode with the lyrics; as the child finds her voice and her courage, the music swells in support, magnifying her growth.

## SUITABILITY ►

This memoir is an accessible and moving examination of race, faith, and identity, suitable for almost any reader beyond beginner level. While Vicki Randle was inspired by the similarities with her own life, her song does not treat race directly. Another difference is that the song deals with incest. Be prepared in case delicate material raises issues for your learner/s. In general, avoid asking learners to write directly about their own abuse or loss. Rather than focusing on the specific situation that troubles the singer, invite learners to discuss faith in times of trouble. The singer had faith first in her sister, and then in God: either one provides fertile ground for discussion of the learner's own experience and beliefs. Family is a universal topic and therefore generates rich and engaging language practice.

## LESSON SUGGESTIONS ►

**PRE-READING ►** Play the song and discuss one or more of the overlapping issues (book and song), before your learner/s begin to read McBride's memoir. Explain that the song is not *about* the book; it was inspired *by* the book. Just as McBride told his story in the book, Randle told her own in the song. Invite learners to predict what the book will be about, referring to the song, the book title, the cover illustration, and, finally, the back cover blurb. Learners may want to make a note of their expectations for comparison after reading the book.

**DISCUSSION ►** The book or the song—or ideally the combination—can lead into discussion of a range of important themes: race, faith or religion, interracial relationships, single parenthood, and the bonds between siblings. Prepare a worksheet or checklist to guide discussion.

**IDENTITY ►** Who am I? How did I get here? These questions affect everyone, no matter what their racial or ethnic identity. Invite learners to ask themselves:

What makes me who I am?

How do I describe myself? (List adjectives.)

What aspects of my identity am I proud of?

In what ways am I shaped by my family or community, and in what ways am I unique?

What is an American?

Ask some of the same questions about the narrator of the book *The Color of Water*, and the narrator of the song "Don't Let Me Fall." Draw three columns on a flip chart or whiteboard, and list the characteristics and features of the young James and Vicki. The learner fills in the third column to describe him or herself.

Learners go on to write about their own identity, at a length determined by their learning level.

**MEMOIR ►** This genre of writing has enjoyed particular popularity since the 1990s, and to read and write about real-life experience is a great impetus for adult literacy and learning.

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## ... LESSON SUGGESTIONS >

Other SIBLs deal with memoir, and could be played and discussed within the theme of telling one's own story:

SIBL *Chapter One* CD, track 5: Michael Paterniti's *Driving Mr. Einstein* is the account of a most unusual road trip, as the song "Einstein's Brain" describes.

SIBL *Chapter One* CD, track 7: Deborah Pades's song "7th Step" conveys vividly both the poverty and the magic of Frank McCourt's harsh Irish childhood, described in *Angela's Ashes*.

SIBL *Chapter Two* CD, track 6: Pades wrote another song, "Bobo's Country," based on a powerful memoir, *Don't Lets Go to the Dogs Tonight*, about growing up in southern Africa. Funny, moving, and shocking, Alexandra Fuller's book is honest about the hard drinking and racism of her family and community, as well as about her love of the country.

SIBL *Chapter Two* CD, track 5: Isabel Allende wrote about the life and death of her daughter in a memoir called *Paula*. Marta Gomez's beautiful Spanish song, "Paula Ausente" (Absent Paula) captures loss, memory, and tribute.

Learners describe (orally or in writing) an incident, place, or person they remember from childhood. One of these topics may trigger a strong memory:

An unforgettable hat

I remember the day when ...

The first trip I ever took ...

The funniest thing that happened ...

The character who stands out most strongly from that time ...

My first day at school ...

A phone call I'll never forget came from ...

# Lesson Plan “Don’t Let Me Fall”

FAMILY AND FAITH • BY HELEN PARKER

**LEVEL >**

This session was designed for adult and young adult students of English as a Second Language, but can be used and adapted for other students and learners.

**PARTICIPANTS >**

While this unit is designed for a class or group, you can use it for one-on-one sessions too.

**MATERIALS >**

A selection of objects associated with different faiths  
Each student brings a photograph of a sibling or family member, and so does the teacher  
CD player and SIBL *Chapter Two* CD  
Copies of the lyrics of “Don’t Let Me Fall” in full  
Copies of the lyrics with words missing, with corrections required, and cut into separate sentences or lines  
A set of visuals depicting the first part of the song  
Copy/ies of the book, *The Color of Water* by James McBride, for follow-up activities

**OBJECTIVES >**

By the end of this unit, students will have covered:

- themes: family and faith
- language focus: past tense narrative
- lexis: “Don’t let me \_\_\_\_\_”, “I put my faith in you”

**WARM-UP ACTIVITIES >**

These pre-listening tasks introduce the topic and generate interest.

Present a selection of objects associated with different faiths, and ask the students to explain what they are and what they have in common. Then put the students in pairs and ask them to tell each other about what symbols, objects, or heroes they keep as a way of maintaining faith and inspiration. They report back to the group on what they learned.

Show a photo of your own sibling or family member, and describe your relationship or tell a story about your family member. (Students generally enjoy hearing a little about your own life.) Then put students into pairs to do the same thing. They take turns interviewing each other about the physical and personality traits of the sibling or relative, and later report back on what they learned.

**WORKSHEET >**

What does your brother look like?  
What is your brother like?  
Write a paragraph about your partner’s family member.

## **VOCABULARY AND PREDICTION ►**

Follow up the interview activity by eliciting “scrawny, fearless and tough” with the use of visuals, or by telling a story.

“Don’t let me fall.” Use a student to demonstrate trust by asking her to fall backwards and catching her. Ask the class what the student doesn’t want to happen, and elicit “Don’t let me fall”.

Hand out a set of visuals relating to the first part of the song. Ask pairs or groups of students to put the pictures in order and to predict the story.

Give students a copy of the lyrics for the second verse with the verbs taken out and listed separately. The task is to predict which verb fits where.

## **LISTENING ACTIVITIES ►**

The students listen to the first two verses of the song. They check to see how close they were in the story prediction and to see if they placed the verbs in the correct places.

Students look at cut up lyrics to try to predict their order. Their first listening task is to see if they got it right. Give students copies of the lyrics with some words missing. They must fill in the blanks as they listen. Give out copies of the lyrics which need correcting. Students listen and correct as necessary. This activity can be designed to take into account common pronunciation problems and to focus on specific sound interference such as r/l substitution for Japanese speakers.

## **COMPREHEN- SION ACTIVITIES ►**

Students listen to the first and the second parts of the song separately and answer the following questions for each section:

- Who does the singer need help from?
- Why does she need help?
- How does she ask for help?
- Does she get the help she needs?
- Does she trust the helper?
- What does she say to show her trust?

The questions are repeated for the second part of the song. Answers are checked with the group.

Once the “Don’t let me \_\_\_\_\_” and “I put my faith in you” forms have been elicited, they can be highlighted and practiced. For instance, students come up with further suggestions for the “Don’t let me \_\_\_\_\_” form, such as

- Don’t let me fall asleep in front of the TV
- Don’t let me forget to call Annie
- Don’t let me drive when I’ve been drinking

Students do a class survey and ask their peers what they put their faith in. The results are recorded, categorized, and analyzed on the board.

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**FOLLOW UP ►**

Students refer to pages 70-73 in the book (the descriptions of Dennis and Helen) and build physical and personality traits from the information given.

Ask students to write about a time when they had an accident, or about a time when they needed faith. They could write it as a memoir or as a song. The students share their stories with each other. Encourage peer correction and feedback.

Ask students to draw a picture to represent a family story. The student will use this picture as a visual aid in telling the story to the class.

Students interview each other about their mothers, coming up with questions and recording answers in writing. This information can be written up and compiled in a class book entitled "A Tribute to Our Mothers."