

*The author reveals his fractured psyche through a series of childhood memories that also demonstrate his coping mechanisms. Told of here are events unfamiliar to many in this day and age and which may lead the reader to psychological conclusions.*

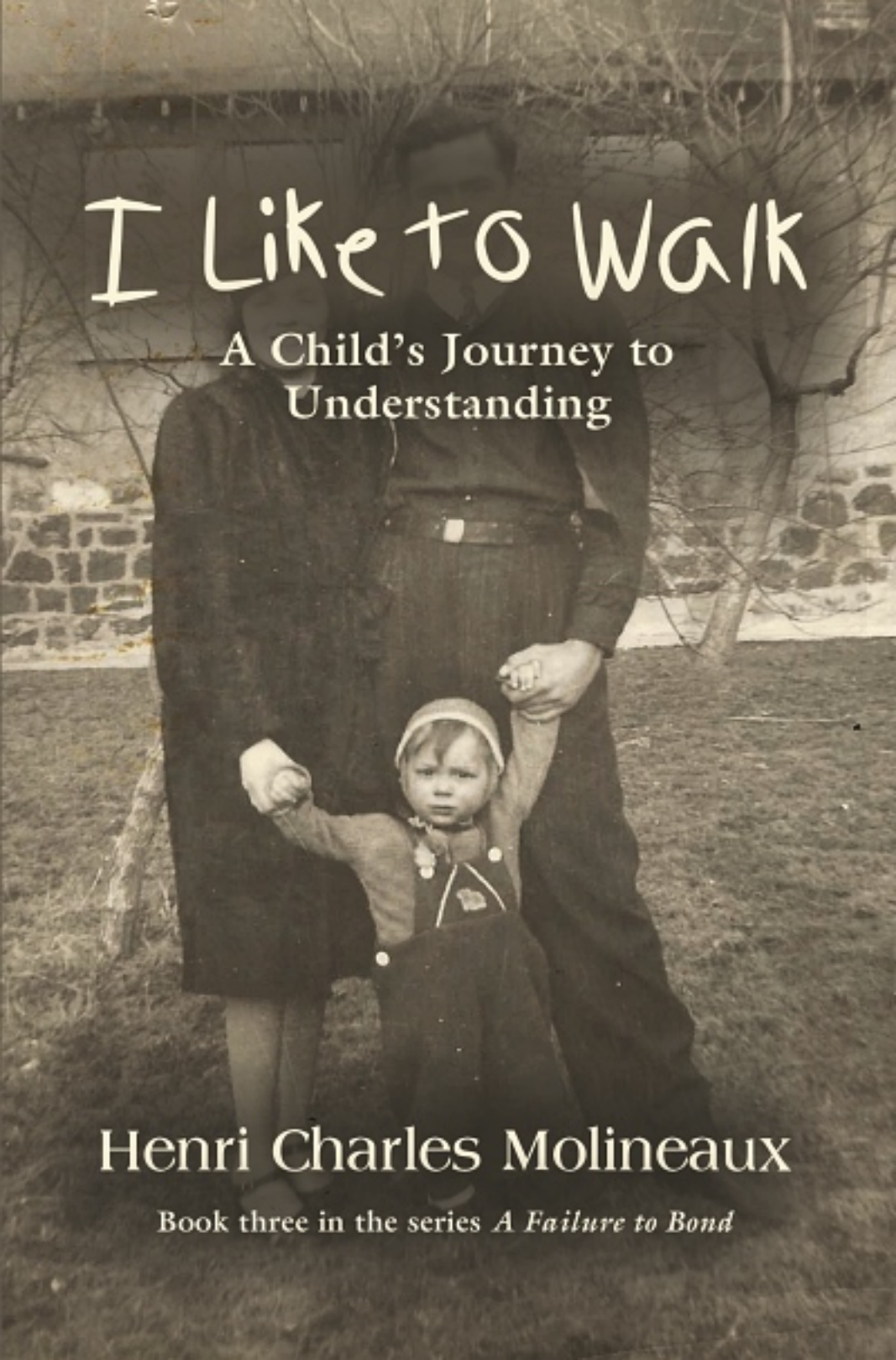
## **I Like to Walk: A Child's Journey to Understanding**

By Henri Charles Molineaux

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# I Like to Walk

A Child's Journey to  
Understanding

Henri Charles Molineaux

Book three in the series *A Failure to Bond*

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Book three of the *A Failure to Bond* series.

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## ***O**NE: *Sailors Snug Harbor**

From the back seat of a car, I would peer.

Any time we drove by, I would gaze.

To this five-year-old boy, Sailors Snug Harbor, the historic retirement home for “aged, decrepit, and worn-out seamen,” had become a familiar and fascinating sight.

I was fascinated not by the six-foot-high wrought-iron fence that guarded it against the road for as far as my young eyes could see.

Nor by the white mansion at the far end of a wide, chestnut tree-lined oil and stone driveway.

Not by its other Greek Revival structures.

Nor its huge barn.

No, not by all that. But by the cows.

Yes, the cows.

Grazing in the limitless pasture that flowed from the fence to a vague horizon at Sailors Snug Harbor.

“Mommy,” I had once asked. “Mommy, what’s them animals?”

“Cows, Charles. You don’t know what a cow is?”

“Oh! Like from the moon?”

“No, silly. Like moo moo. Like milk. And butter?”

I had been as unsure of what she was talking about as of who this woman was I had always called “Mommy.”

Around me often, this woman dressed me, fed me two or three times a day, tucked me into bed at night, and kissed my forehead. Women were always kissing me and saying, “Oh, he’s so cute!”

When I stopped being a baby, started dressing myself, tying my own shoes, I started calling her “Mom.”

Every holiday Mom’s family gathered at one home or the other. Uncle Louie would pick us up and take us, Mom up front with baby sister Irene in her arms, and my younger sister Barbara in the back seat next to me. To and from Christmas dinner or Easter Sunday, at Aunt Eleanor and Uncle Louie’s, or at Grandma and Grandpa’s stone house.

“Your grandpa set every stone,” Mom often said. Big, heavy stones. “Wanna hear something funny?” Mom said. “Grandpa is from Rome; Grandma is Albanese. The only way they understand each other is when they’re speaking broken English!” She chuckled. I didn’t get the humor.

Lately, on the way, we’d pass Sailors Snug Harbor, and I’d look for the cows.

Uncle Louie’s new car was shiny clean inside and out. The fabric scratched my bare arms but had a nice smell. Uncle Louie’s old car smelled like a dirty ashtray.

Mom and Uncle Louie would sing the whole way, to wherever and back. The car had a radio, but they’d much rather sing than to listen.

They sang about a garden fence, then an apple tree, a porch swing, kissee stuff, and sad stuff. And about things

I didn't understand. What was a melancholy baby? What were honkytonk blues?

The same songs I heard play through mesh-covered speakers at Aunt Eleanor and Uncle Louie's house on their rosewood console radio with a turntable.

I'd sit cross-legged on the bare floor in front of the console radio, listening to music and watching dust jump off the vibrating mesh.

What I enjoyed most, however, about the console radio with a turntable was scary storytime. As I'd sit to listen to *The Shadow*, I would check around and behind me when a deep-voiced announcer asked, "*Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!*" And then a chilling laugh. That was scary good.

Or, *The Lone Ranger*. "*Hi-yo, Silver! Away!*" The stirring theme made me feel like I was holding tight on the back of a speedy silver horse.

What Barbara enjoyed most was Chinese checkers. The board was always set out in advance of her visits.

Holiday dinners were the only times family gathered.

Sometimes Aunt Leah, Uncle Vic, and their two little girls. Sometimes Aunt Flo and her boxer boyfriend, flat-nosed "Uncle" Carlo. But always dowdy Grandma, burly Grandpa, and we four.

But not Uncle Bill, his wife, and daughter anymore. And not Dad.

When all were there, the kids were made to sit at the kids' table. I didn't much like having to sit with little girls.

Uncle Vic was British. He smoked a pipe. *When I grow up, I'm gonna smoke a pipe*. It smelled much better than cigarettes and stinky ashtrays.

A dashing, handsome man with a mustache and his pipe, why had he married my homely Aunt Leah?

Uncle Louie was the original Mister Five-by-Five: five feet tall, five feet wide.

Two bowls of salad would be set on the dining table. One for Uncle Louie, one for the rest of us. Then two bowls of spaghetti with meatballs and tomato sauce. One for Uncle Louie, one for the rest of us. Two platters of meat, sometimes turkey, sometimes ham. One for Uncle Louie, one for the rest of us. Add mashed potatoes, a couple of veggies, and dig in.

\*\*\*

The sun blazed above the Bayonne Bridge on July 4, 1942, when Uncle Louie drove us home from Grandma and Grandpa's stone house in Uncle Louie's Chevrolet.

So fast Uncle Louie drove. I barely caught a glimpse of the cows in the pasture at Sailors Snug Harbor on the north shore of Staten Island, New York City.

Where Uncle Louie took us was now familiar too. Mom called it a cold-water flat. That's where we lived.

Our stuccoed building sat between two weathered-red-tar-shingled houses, across from a weed-overgrown block-wide plot.

We lived on the second floor, a block down the hill from Bard Avenue. We hadn't lived there long.

It was the third house I could remember. There had been many I could not.

We once lived above a tavern where the jukebox and drunken laughter filtered up through the linoleum-covered



floor. Barbara would look through a crack into the men's room below and see the men urinating.

The back room was a sun porch. While playing with matches, I started a fire behind the entry door. It got out of hand until a cool-headed Barbara rushed to quench it with a couple glasses of water. I remember blistered paint.

Now, here we were, in a cold-water flat, already with its own memories.

Memories of Barbara and me sleeping in a back room on a cot and Irene in a crib in the living room where Mom slept on a convertible sofa.

Of Mom getting in late. We three kids asleep. Barbara waking, crying, and calling out in the dark. Mom grabbing her up, plopping her down on the kitchen countertop, onto a drinking glass. The glass shattering. Barbara bleeding.

Of a morning, mom bathing us one by one as we stood in a basin of water Mom had warmed on the kitchen stove.

And as I stood nude in the basin, on a table in the middle of the living room, Mom stepping away a moment, and from behind me, a twitter.

Sitting on the convertible sofa, now opened as a bed, sat Barbara.

“Stop looking at me! Stop looking! Stop looking!”

But Barbara didn't stop looking, and with a hand to her mouth, she giggled.

“Stop looking! Stop looking!”

Mom returned. “What's wrong?”

“Barbara's looking at me!”

“Well, if you don't want her to see you, then stop turning around.”

Mom didn't understand. I stammered but persisted.

“I didn’t look at you when you were standing here,” I said to Barbara. She left the room.

Of the morning Mom dressed us in our finest, and as we stepped out the front door, “Where’s Renee?” Mom asked. We looked back. Irene stood at the top of the stairs, laughing and naked.

\*\*\*

Next morning, Mom dressed and fed us. Well, no. Barbara and I were big kids now. We dressed ourselves. Mom helped. Then she was gone.

On a warm summer day, I had nothing to do. No friends to play with. No one to take me anywhere while Mom was at work. Or wherever she was. I didn’t know. I didn’t understand.

*I should go see the cows at Sailors Snug Harbor.*

I set out on my own.

A boy, perhaps a year younger than I, was playing in the dirt in front of the house next to my cold-water flat.

“Where ya going, mister?” he asked.

“I’m going to see the cows at Sailors Snug Harbor. Wanna come?”

“You betcha, mister.” He jumped up, brushed his hands on his pants, and tagged along. Tagged along, that is, until the corner.

I stepped off the curb to cross the street but turned to the boy as I saw he stood frozen.

“Are you coming?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Mommy told me never cross the street without her.”

*What a sissy!*

Well, my mom had never told me any such thing, so I turned and resumed my walk to go see the cows at Sailors Snug Harbor.

One block to the right, three to the left, and turn right onto Richmond Terrace.

"The Terrace" stretched end to end across the north shore of Staten Island. On the other side were the railroad tracks and in the distance the foul-smelling bay.

Flat-bed trucks, so old they rolled on solid rubber tires, bounced along loaded heavy with sheetrock from the gypsum plant down the road aways, leaving a trail of white powder. The truck drivers waved, and the truck horns called out *oooga oooga!*

Along the concrete sidewalk I strode, on my way to see the cows at Sailors Snug Harbor.

*Step on a crack. Break your mother's back.* I didn't want that for my mother. But with an expansion joint at every fifth step, I soon grew tired of breaking stride.

*Stupid rule anyhow. Can't be true. She'll be fine, I'm sure. We'll see how Mom's back is when I get home.*

Like stars streaking by a starship's portal, so below me the grains of sand in the concrete sidewalk, and I felt like I was flying.

In the uncut grass to my right, a cricket chirped. As fast as I walked, the chirping cricket kept pace. How could that be? How could this little critter remain by my side as I walked and walked and walked at such a pace?

The cricket chirped for a distance of which I had no estimation, as the grains of sand in the concrete streaked below.

From the corner of my eye, the wrought-iron fence, an endless line of Roman spears in both directions. I had been walking alongside it for a while.

From the sidewalk, I peered into the pasture through the fence.

No cows.

I stepped forward onto the grass, two hands grasping, and my face pressed against the steel pickets.

No cows.

I walked farther, to the long drive.

No cows.

Only the mansion. Several stately structures. And a barn. And a water tower. And way, way in the distance, the trees.

*That's okay. I'll go home.*

I arrived mere minutes after Mom had. She had found my sisters as she had ordered, good little girls, playing with their dolls on the asbestos-tiled one-bedroom floor.

But Charles had been nowhere to be found!

As I neared, Mom glared, with fists on her hips.

“Where have you *been*? I was worried *sick*!”

“I went to see the cows at Sailors Snug Harbor, but they weren't there.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry, sweetheart.”

“That's okay, Mom. I just wanted to go for a walk.”

She was sad for me. I was not.

I was too young to understand that I had accomplished a deeper goal than to see the cows when I took that walk to Sailors Snug Harbor.

## ***TWO: A Walk to a Brooklyn Mudhole***

All my worldly goods in an overnight case, Irene's and Barbara's each in a brown paper bag, and off we went. Clambered onto a city bus, three ragamuffins in tow, with Irene's tiny hand held firmly in Mom's.

And so, in innocence and ignorance, our day had begun.

From the bus to the causeway to a cavernous waiting room, our laughter echoed as Barbara and I dashed ahead and ducked under clacking turnstiles. Mom called us back. Said we had to pay the nickel toll.

Driven up the ramp by a stampede of passengers, thus we boarded the orange-painted double-decker ferry. The boat pulled from the dock with a terrible roar.

Barbara ran gaily around the outside upper deck as I ran behind to be sure she stayed safe. We paused but for a moment that we might know what the oddly-dressed people who spoke in a language we didn't understand pointed at and strained to see. Through the mid-morning smog, a green statue far off, a robed lady, holding a torch to the sky. Off again through wide, heavy doors, down

broad stairs, through cigarette smoke, past the pungent men's room, and out the front doors to a heady whiff of crisp, salty air as the boat churned across the bay.

Past four lanes of automobiles, all of them black, with running boards and bullet-shaped headlamps mounted on front fenders. In through the doors on the other side we ran, past perfumed ladies and the fragrant ladies' room.

Up the stairs into the main passenger cabin, with row upon row, and lining the walls, hard benches, and scattered among them murmuring gentlemen in fedoras and ladies in cloche hats and net headwear.

"No running!" a stranger shouted.

Two shoeshine boys, grown men from Salerno all in black, called out, "Shine! Shine! Wanna shine?"

They trekked the aisles hawking their service, each toting in one hand a homemade shine box with a footrest atop, packed with supplies, and a cushion to kneel on in the other.

Again we ran, through wide, heavy doors to the outside deck. Ahead sat Mom, facing the risen sun, Irene perched at her side.

Mom stared toward the Brooklyn skyline as Irene searched her dull eyes for answers to questions she didn't know how to ask.

I looked to see what Mom saw. There was nothing.

There was nothing from the boat to the subway, from the subway to the trolley. There was nothing.

"Where are we going, Mom?"

From her blank face came no answer.

Irene looked up into her mommy's eyes. Still no answer.

Barbara laughed, I chuckled, as we stepped down from the trolley. It had felt like a carnival ride.

We laughed at the lines pressed into our skin from the cane webbing.

We stood on a Brooklyn corner in front of a two-story, red-brick building. Mom guided us toward the building.

The many large windows were barred. The entrance: double steel doors.

Mom ushered me, with my overnight case, and two sisters, each hugging their brown paper bag, up concrete steps, through the unfriendly doors that squealed open, into a starkly furnished, bright anteroom.

A broad-hipped woman stepped up to greet us. She didn't smile. She eyed us all as though we were dirt.

Barbara spied the wide staircase off to the right. She thought they'd be fun to run up and down.

Words were spoken between Mom and the woman. Barbara was called over. Irene fell to the floor, crying and kicking. Mom put her hand on my shoulder, turned me around, and guided me to the door. The door clanged shut behind us.

Mom and I climbed into another trolley.

I sat silent. I looked into Mom's eyes. She sat silent.

In a minute or ten, we stood on another corner, facing across the street, where stood another two-story, red-brick building with barred windows and double steel doors.

A cheery woman greeted us. Then Mom was gone.

My sisters and I were now wards of The Children's Aid Society of the City of New York.

\*\*\*

Dinner was a bowl of boiled white rice sprinkled with cinnamon. The smell made me nauseous.

Seated next to me at a table for eight, among ten such tables in a vast dining hall, a chubby boy was thrilled when I offered my bowl.

After dinner, having gone without and no one having noticed, I leaned against a wall observing until a matron approached and told me to follow.

Assigned a top bunk in one of eight in a dorm for boys ages seven through ten, I was told to strip and join a rush of naked boys to the shower room across the hall.

There were three tubs, three boys to a tub, and from the girls' dorm, two teenage girls to supervise our shower.

As boys splashed and lathered, shouts and laughter echoing off bare walls, I stood waiting my turn, hiding my private parts from girls and boys alike.

“You don't have to do that. Look at Tony. Tony used to be that way, but look at him now.”

I remained ill at ease, but I uncovered.

I went to bed hungry that night.

Twice a week, I'd go hungry, and no one noticed.

Going hungry was nothing new.

I recall a time, not long before, living above a corner grocery a block from our school. On lunch break, with no lunch to eat and no dime to buy one, we'd go home. I'd sometimes make a catchup and sugar sandwich on white bread. Sometimes—not often—the store lady fed us.

I had gone hungry so many times it felt normal.

\*\*\*



To another new school the next day. To be ushered into a classroom of faceless second-grade classmates.

I knew no one. No one knew me. I have no memories of that school. I have no memories of my teacher or my classmates.

\*\*\*

After showers one night, the teenage girls asked the boys if they'd want to play Truth, Dare, or Consequences. The boys all leaped about, clapped their hands as they all shouted, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

The girls dared us to run down the hall to the younger boys' dorm and kiss the teen in charge. All the boys took off running.

"Why aren't you going?" one of my girls asked. "You might not like the consequences."

I arrived several seconds after the last boy had kissed the blushing girl's cheek. She jumped as I burst through the door.

"Oh my! Another one?"

But she offered a rounded cheek. The same cheek she had offered to fifteen boys before me.

I used a faucet in the hall to rinse my mouth.

There would be no more kissing of teenage girls' cheeks.

\*\*\*

The infirmary would fit only three beds and two cribs. Something was going around. Available for me was a crib.

An older boy teased, "Look at the baby in a crib!"

I quickly angered. He laughed and teased the more.

I tore into him with every curse word I had ever heard.  
The nurses came running.  
We were both warned.  
He teased again. I swore again, and again the nurses  
came running. He stopped teasing.  
I was two days in that crib.

\*\*\*

It was not long after, or maybe it was, when I felt a need to take a walk. I would go to see my sisters at the other red-brick building. I knew how to get there. It was straight this way.

I liked to walk. I didn't understand why, but the rhythm and vibrations were soothing.

The sun followed me. When it was straight overhead, I had reached the brick walkway and steel picket fence at the edge of the salty bay, not having seen my sisters' red-brick building.

I ignored the park bench and scanned the promenade. Two squirrels chased each other around a tree trunk. In the hazy distance, far across the salty bay, an orange ferry and a green lady.

The laughing and mocking cries of several boys reached my ears.

The boys danced around a quarter-acre mudhole I had passed along the way. The object of their derision was a wailing boy at the bottom of the pit, knee-deep in red mud, struggling to reach the dry bank on the other side.

The taunted boy had accepted their challenge to cross the excavated site, and now with snot and tears flowing, he was in fear of sinking farther or being left there to die.

In near desperation, he would not give up, and in a minute, climbed from the pit, though having lost a shoe.

*I'll show those taunting boys. I'll walk across that mud with no trouble at all.*

*I could, but why should I? I don't know them. They don't know me. And I'll need both shoes to walk back.*

This time, on the way, I'd stay alert for my sisters' red-brick building. They'd be upset if they learned I had gone past and not stopped by to see them.

I had not yet seen theirs when my own appeared ahead.

Had I passed it while looking down? Looking down at the grains of sand in the sidewalk streaking by? It had felt like I was flying. Arms outstretched and flying!

Maybe I had been mistaken about my sisters' building being straight this way. Maybe I had forgotten to look.

Oh well, perhaps another day. Besides, I hardly knew them. I had no further thought of my sisters.

The anteroom opened to a gymnasium. Army green steel lockers lined the walls. In one corner, an equipment room; in another, the office.

"Grab my hand!" my bunkmate called out to me. He was at the end of a line of boys all hand in hand, moving slowly across the room. In the lead was the biggest of us, taking the line of boys into a wide turn. "Grab on!" my bunkmate called as the line took on speed. "We're doing the whip!"

I grabbed his hand.

Like a giant letter S, the line curled as though a snake, faster and faster, the tail end lashing at every turn.

"Hold on tight!"

Faster and faster until no longer would my weary legs keep pace. My feet left the floor. My hand slipped from his. I flew—*whoosh!*—across the room—*bam!*—into an Army green locker, and I crumpled to the floor.

To laughter all around me, I slowly stood. I examined myself. Slightly embarrassed but unharmed, my attention went back to the whip.

My bunkmate went flying, then another and another as the whip snaked and flashed around the room.

When too few boys remained for anyone to go flying, another whip was started.

Should I go again? No. I was weary from my walk, and it was soon time for dinner. I had missed lunch. No one had noticed.

Well-fed and showered, as my dormmates chattered and bounced about the dorm, I relaxed on my bunk, hoping for another call to Truth or Dare.

This time I'd be first with a kiss, and maybe on her lips. But what if they didn't dare? Or if it were a different dare? Well, maybe I'd just go down there, anyhow, and kiss her on the lips.

It had been a good day. I had flown to the bay and back, and I had flown twenty feet from the tail end of a whip.

And I had learned that it was best to avoid mudholes because you might lose a shoe or die, but if ever stuck in one, don't give up.

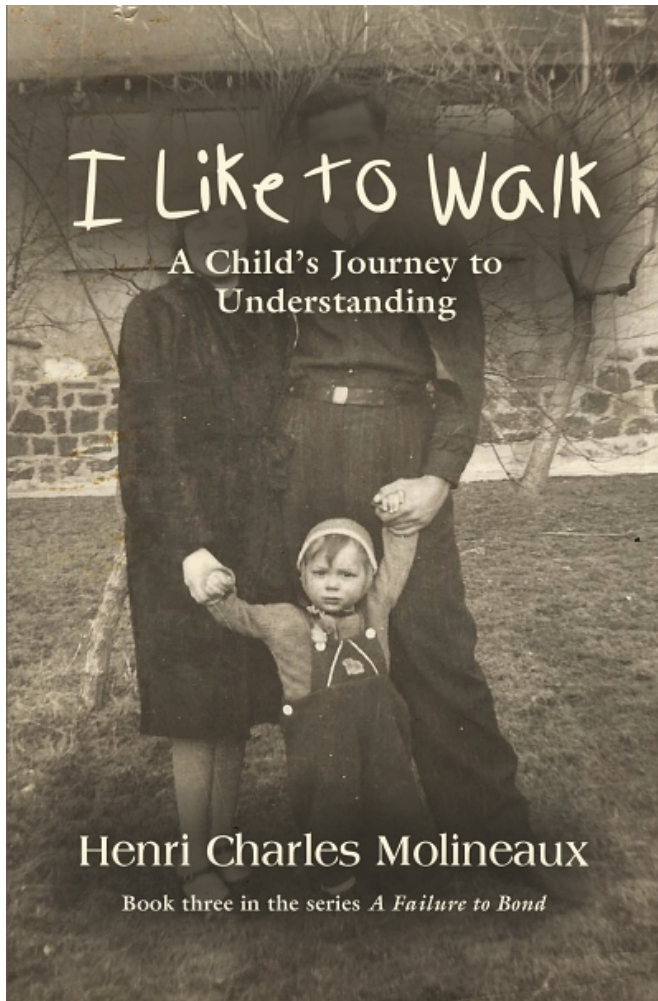
I suppose, too, I had learned about centrifugal force.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

The author grew up in and around New York City during the golden years following World War II, the son of a barroom brawler.

He attended thirteen different grammar schools, some while a ward of the state, as his mother moved him and his two sisters from place to place to escape an abusive husband or a landlord looking to collect the rent. Married three times, he has three beautiful children and is proud of his three grandkids, but now lives alone.

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