

GROWING UP IN EDGE CITY

by Fredrik Pohl

Among the closest friends I had in the thirty years I lived in Red Bank, New Jersey, was a family named Waterman. Bob and Dorothy and their offspring, who were much of an age with my own. It was a great loss when they moved nearly a hundred miles away, to the antique New Jersey resort city of Cape May, which is about as far south as you can get in the state without swimming. So, when I could, I drove down to visit them with as much of my family as could be collected for the purpose. All the way down the Garden State Parkway, on one visit, a story was nibbling at my mind—not just a set of characters and situations but a particular way of telling the story that I had just invented and wanted to try out. After we'd all caught up on old times over lunch, and the kids had none off to the boats or the shopping centers or the boardwalk and beach, I mentioned to Dorothy Waterman that I had just realized the right place to set the story was right in Cape May. "Well, she said, "I've got a typewriter I'm not using— And so, sitting on the Watermans' porch, between lunch and our dinner date at one of the best seafood restaurants in the world, this came out.

In the evenings after school Chandlie played private games. He was permitted to do so. His overall index of gregariousness was high enough to allow him to choose his own companions, or no companion at all but a Pal, when he wanted it that way. On Tuesday and Thursday he generally spent his time with a seven-year-old female named Marda, quick and bright, with a chiseled, demure little face that would have beseeemed pretty woman of twenty, apt at mathematical intuitions and the stringing of beads. The proctors logged in their private games under the heading of "sensuality sensitivity training, but they called them "You Show Me Yours and I'll Show You Mine. The proctors, in their abstract and deterministic way, approved of what Chandlie did. Even then he was marked for special challenge, having been evaluated as Councilman potential. and when on most other evenings Chandlie went down to the machine rooms and checked out a Pal, no objections were raised, no questions were asked, and no follow-up warnings were flagged in the magnetic cores of his record-fiche. He went off freely and openly, wherever he chose. This was so even though there was a repeating anomaly in his log. Almost every evening for an hour or two, Chandlie's personal transponder stopped broadcasting his location fix. They could not tell where he was in Edge City. They accepted this because of their own limitations. It was recorded in the proctors basic memory file that there were certain areas of the City in which old electromagnetic effects interfered with the radio direction finding signals. They were not strategically important areas. The records showed nothing dangerous or forbidden there. The proctors noted the gap in the log but attached no importance to it. As a matter of routine they opened up the Pal's chrome-steel tamper-proof course-plot tapes from time to time, but it was only spot-checking. They did the same for everyone's Pal. They never found anything significantly wrong in Chandlie's. If they had been less limited, they might have inquired further. A truly good program would have cross-referenced Chandlie's personality profile, learned from it that he was gifted in man-machine interactions, and deduced from this the possibility that he had bugged the Pal. If they had then checked the Pal's permanent record of instructions, they would have learned that it was so. They did not do that. The proctors were not particularly sophisticated computer programs. They saw in their inputs no reason to be suspicious. Chandlie's father and mother could have told the programs all about him, but they had been Dropouts since he was three.

At the edge of Edge City, past the school sections, near the hospital and body-disposal units, there was a dark and odorous place. Ancient steel beams showed scarred and discolored. They bore lingering radioactivity, souvenir of an old direct hit from a scrambler missile. It was no longer a dangerous place, but it was not an attractive one, either, and on the master location charts it was designated for storage. It

was neither very useful nor very much used. What could be stored there was only what was not very much valued, and there were few such things kept inEdgeCity . If they were remembered. The air was dank. Spots of mildew and rust appeared and swelled on whatever was there. However often the Handys came in to scrub and burn and polish, the surfaces were never clean. It was environmentally interesting, in a city where there was no such thing as environment, for at times it was pervaded by a sound like a distant grumbling roar, and at times it grew quite cold or quite hot. These were the things that had first interested Chardlie in it. What capped his interest was discovering by accident, one evening when he had just returned from wandering in the strange smells and sounds, that the proctors had not known where he was. He determined to spend more time there. The thought of doing something the proctors did not know all about was both scary and irresistible. His personal independence index had always been very high, almost to the point of remedial action. On his second visit, or third, he discovered the interesting fact that some of the closed doors were not locked on a need-to-enter basis. They were merely closed and snapped. Turning a knob would open them. Anyone could do it. He opened every door he passed. Most of them led only to empty rooms, or to chambers that might as well be empty for all he could make of the gray metal cylinders or yellowed fiber cartons that were stacked forgotten inside them. Some of the doors, however, led to other places, and some of the places were not even marked on the city charts. With his Pal romping and humming its shrill electronic note by his side, Chandlie penetrated the passages and stairways he found right up to the point at which he became certain he was not permitted to be there. A buckled guide rail that gouged at his flesh told him that. These areas were dangerous. Having reached that conclusion, he returned to his studies and spent a week learning how to reprogram the Pal to go into sleep mode on voice command from himself. He then returned to the dangerous area, left the Pal curled up inside one of the uninteresting doors, and went on into the unknown, down a broad and dusty flight of stairs.

In the pits underEdgeCity the air was damper and danker even than in the deserted places above. It was not at all cold. Charidlie was astonished to discover that he was sweating. He had never known what it was like to sweat before in his life, except as a natural consequence of exercise or, once or twice, while experiencing an illness surrogate. It took some time for him to realize that the reason for this was that the air about him was quite warm, perhaps as much as ten degrees over the 280C at which he had spent his life. Also, the grumbling roaring noise was sharper and nearer, although not as loud as he had sometimes heard it before. He looked about himself wonderingly and uncertainly. There were many things here that were strange, unfamiliar, and, although he had not had enough of a background of experience to be sure of correctly identifying the sensation, frightening. For example, this part of the City was not very well lighted. Every other public place he had ever seen had been identically illuminated with the changing skeins of soft brilliance from their liquid crystal walls. Here it was not like that. Light came from discrete points. There was a bright spot enclosed in a glass sphere here, another there, another five meters away. Objects cast shadows. Chandlie spent some time experimenting with making shadows. Sometimes there were considerable gaps between the points of light, with identical glass spheres that looked like the others but contained no central glowing core, as though they had stopped working and for some reason the Handy machines had not made them work again. Where this happened the shadows merged to produce what he recognized as darkness. Sometimes as a little boy during the times when his room light was sleep-reduced he had pulled the coverlid over his head to see what darkness was like. Warm and cozy. This was not cozy. Also, there were distant thumping, creaking sounds. Also, he remembered that not far above him and beyond him was the corpse-disposal area, and while he had no unhealthy fear of cadavers, he did not like them. Chandlie felt to some degree ill at ease. To some degree he wished that he had not countercommanded his Pal to stay behind. It was exciting to be all on his own, but it was also worrisome. It would have been a comfort to have the Pal gamboling and humming beside him, to see its bright milky- blue eyes following him, to know that in the event of any unprogrammed event it would automatically relay a data pulse to the proctors for evaluation and, if need be, action. What action? he thought. Like rescuing a little boy from goblins, he joked to himself, remembering a story from his preprimary anthropology talk-times. Joking to himself helped him put aside the cobwebby fears. He still

felt them, but he did not feel any of them strongly enough to turn back. His index of curiosity, also, was very high.

All of this was taking place on a Wonday, after scheduled hours, which meant that Chandlie had received his weekly therapies that day and was chockful of hormones, vitamins, and confidence. Perhaps it was that which made him so bold. On such accidents of timing so many things depend. But he went on. After a time he discovered that the new world he was exploring was no longer getting darker. It was getting lighter. Simultaneously it was becoming even more hot. Sweat streamed from his unpracticed pores. Salty moisture drenched the long hair at his temples, dampened his chest, rolled in beads from his armpits and down his back. He became aware that he himself had an odor. The light was brighter before him than it was behind, and rounding a corner, he saw a yellow radiance that made him squint. He stopped. Reinventing the Eskimo glare-reducer on the spot, he stared through his half-spread fingers. Then, heedless, he ran down a flight of ancient steps, almost falling as one slid loosely away beneath him but righting himself and running on. He stopped on an uneven surface of grayish-yellowish gritty grains that he recognized, from Earth Sciences, as sand. The great distant noise was close now, grave and impersonal rather than threatening; he saw what it came from. Rolling hillocks of water humped themselves slowly up out of a flat blue that receded into infinity before him. They grew, peaked, bent forward, and crashed in white wet spray, and the noise was their serial collision with themselves and with the sand. The heat was unbearable, but Chandlie bore it. He was entranced, thrilled, consternated, delighted almost out of his skull. This was a "beach! That was "sea! He was "outdoors! No such things had ever happened to any young person he had ever known or heard of. No such things happened to anyone but Dropouts. He had never expected any such thing to happen to him. It was not that he was unaware that there were places not in the Cities. Earth Sciences had taught him all that, as they taught him about the sluggishly molten iron core at the Earth's heart and the swinging distant bodies that were called "Moon and "planets and "stars. He had even known, by implication and omission rather than by ever hearing it stated as a fact, that somewhere in the world between the Cities were places like the places where people had lived generations and, oh, ages ago, when people were dull and cruel, and that it was at least in theory possible for a person from a city to stand in such a place and not at once become transformed into a Dropout, or physically changed, or killed. But he had never known that such places could be found nearEdgeCity .

All that very painful brightness came from one central brightness which, as Chandlie knew, was the "Sun. It cost him some pain and several minutes of near blindness to learn that it could not be looked at directly without penalty. Its height, he recalled, meant "midday, which was puzzling until he deduced and remembered enough to understand that City time was world time. He had known that solar time differed as one went east or west, but it had never mattered before. As he became able to see again he looked about him. When he looked before him, he saw the roiling sweep of the ocean, dizzily big. When he looked behind him, he saw the skirted and stilted bulk ofEdgeCity rising away like the Egyptian tetrahedral tombs for the royal dead. To his right Was a stretch of irregular sand and sea that curved around out of sight under a corner of the city. But to his left, to his left, there was something quite strange. There were buildings. Buildings, plural. Not one great polystructure like a proper City, buildings. People moved among them. He breathed deeply to generate courage and walked toward them. Plodding through the sand was new to him, difficult, like walking with five-kilogram anklets on a surface that slid and slipped and caved irregularly away under his footgloves. The people saw him long before he was close enough to speak or hear, even a shout, over the wind and the breaking waves. They spoke to each other, and then gestured toward him. He could see that they were smiling. He knew at once that they were Dropouts. As he came closer to them, and a few of them walked toward him., he could see that some of them were not very clean, and all of them were straggly-haired, the women just on their scalps, the men wherever men could grow hair, beards, sideburns, mustaches, one barrel of a man thatched front and back with a bear's pelt. They all seemed quite old. Surely not one was under twenty. Physically they were deviant in accidental and unwholesome ways. On school trips to the corpse-disposal areas

Chandlie had been struck by the unkemptness of the dead, but these people were living and unkempt. Some were gray and balding. Some women's breasts hung like sucked-dry fruits. Some wore glass disks in frames before their eyes. The faces of some were seamed and darkened. Some stood stooped, or bent, or walked limping. The clothes they wore did not hug and constrain them as right clothing should. The things they wore were smocks or shorts or sweaters. Or anything at all. As Chandlie had never seen an ugly person, he did not recognize what he felt as revulsion; and as he did not recognize it, it was not that, it was only disquiet. He looked at them curiously and seekingly. It occurred to him that his father and his mother might be among these people. He did not recognize them, but then he had very little memory of what his father and mother looked like.

As a very little boy Chandlie had experienced a programming malfunction in one of his proctors. It had taken the form of giving him incomplete answers and sometimes incomplete questions. The parts it left out were often the direct statements. The parts it gave him were then only the supplementary detail: "Proctor, what is the shape of the Earth?" - which is why your transparency buildups show a ship disappearing from the bottom up as it reaches the horizon. He had required remedial confidence building after that. And may have had an overdose. It was a little like that with the Dropouts. They made him welcome, speaking to him from very close up so that he turned his head to avoid their breaths. They offered him disgusting sorts of food, which he ate anyway, raw fruits and cooked meats. Some of them actually touched him or tried to kiss him. "What we want to give you, they said, "is love. This troubled him. He did not want to conceive a child with any of them, and some of the speakers, also, were male. They said things like, "You are so young to come to us, and so pretty. We welcome you. They showed him everything they did and offered him their pleasures. On a walkway made of wood with the beach below them and surf spraying up onto his face they took him into a round building with a round turntable. Some of the younger, stronger men pushed at poles and stanchions and got it revolving slowly and wobblingly. It bore animal figures that moved as it turned, and they invited him to ride them. "It is a merry-go-round, they cried. To oblige them he sat on one of the horses for a revolution or two, but it was nothing compared to a Sleeter or Jumping Pillows. "We live freely and without constraint, they said. "We take what the world gives us and harm no one. We have joys the City has forgotten. Causing him to detach the lower part of his day garment so that his feet and legs were naked to the codpiece, they walked with him along the edge of the water. Waves came up and bathed his ankles and receded again. Grit lodged between his toes. His thighs itched from drying salt. They said to him: "See over here, where the walls have corroded away. They led him under the skirt of the City to an in-port. Great cargo carriers were rolling in from the agrocommunes, pouring grain and frozen foods into the hoppers, from which three of the youngest Dropouts were scooping the next day's meals into canvas pouches. "The City does not need all of this, they said, "but if they knew we took it, they would drive us away. They warmed berries between their grimy palms and gave them to Chandlie until he could eat no more. "Stay with us, they pleaded. "You are a human being, or you would not have come here alone! The City is not a life for human beings. He began to feel quite ill. He was conscious, too, of the passage of time. As the sun disappeared behind the gray pyramid and the wind from the sea became cold, they said: "If you must go back, go back. But come again. We do not have many children here ever. We like you. We want to love you. He allowed some of them to touch him, then turned and retraced his steps. He did not like the way he felt and did not understand the way he smelled. It was the first time in his life that Chandlie had been dirty.

When he reactivated his Pal, the machine immediately went into receiving mode. It then turned to Chandlie with its milky-blue eyes gleaming and spoke: "Chandlie, you must report at once to the proctors. "All right, he said. He had been expecting it. Although he was good at reprogramming machines, he had not expected to be gone so long and had not prepared for it.

The proctors received him in the smallest of the Interview Halls. He entered through a door that closed behind him and immediately became only one more square in a checkerboard of mirrors and gray metal

panels. Behind some of the mirrors the proctors were scanning him. Behind others there might be members of the council, or apprentices, or interested citizens, anyone. He could not see, he could only see himself reflected into infinity wherever he looked. He stood under the heatless bright lights, blinking stubbornly. The proctors did not ask him any questions. They did not make any threats, either. They merely made a series of statements as follows: "Chandlie. First, you have interfered with the operation of your Pal. Second, you have absented yourself without authorization. Third, you have visited an area of the City where you have no occasion to go. Fourth, you have failed to report your activities in the proper form. They were then silent for a time. It was at this time that he was permitted to offer any corrections or supplementary information if he wished to do so. He did not. He stood mute, and after the appropriate time had passed, the proctors instructed him to withdraw. One square of mirror swung forward and became a door again, and he left the room. He returned to his dormitory. His peers were all in their own rooms and presumably asleep; it was very late. Chandlie bathed carefully, attempted to vomit, failed, rinsed his mouth carefully, and put on a sleeping blouse. The food the Dropouts had given him did not satisfy him, but he was afraid to eat until it had gone through his system. All that night he tossed and turned, waking up enough to know where he was and remember where he had been and then falling back to sleep again, unsatisfied and unresolved.

For some days Chandlie continued his normal life, but he was aware that the matter would not stop there. Prudence suggested to him that he should behave at least normally, if possible exemplarily. Curiosity overrode prudence. In free-study times he dialed for old books that were known to be of interest to Dropouts, *Das Kapital* and *Walden* and silly, sexy satires by people like Voltaire and Swift. He played old ballads by people like Dylan Thomas and Joan Baez. He read poetry: Wordsworth, Browning, Ginsberg. He studied old documents that, so said his books, had once been electrically important, and was baffled by contextual ignorance ("A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed. "Militia ? "State ? "Bear - in the sense of bearing a child, perhaps? But only the arm parts?), until he reached the decision to ask for clarification from the preceptors for Social Studies. Then he was baffled to understand why these things were important. They were gritty days for Chandlie. His age-peers detected that something was wrong almost at once, deduced that he was in trouble with the proctors and, naturally enough, anticipated the punishment of the proctors with punishments of their own. In Living Chess he was played only as a pawn, though usually he had been a bishop and once a rook. His Tai Chi movements were voted grotesque, and he was not invited to exercise with the rest of his group. They did not speak of his situation to him directly, except for Marda. She sat down next to him in free time and said, "I'll miss you if you go away, Chandlie. He pored mulishly over a series of layover transparency prints. "Why do you look at them when I'm here? she cried. He said crushingly, "Your genitalia are juvenile. These are adult, much more interesting. She grew angry. "I don't think I want to conceive with you ever, she said. He put down the cassette of transparencies, stood up, and rapped on the door of an older girl. It was the first time he had ever seen tears. The second time was the following Fiveday, when he was called before the council of decision-making persons and saw his own.

The council, which was charged with the responsibility for making decisions in all cases not covered by standing instructions to the proctors, met when it needed to, where it chose to. Chandlie was of some interest to them, for whatever personal reasons each of them had for concerning him- herself, and so there were nearly twenty-five persons present when he was admitted. The room they chose to use this time was rather like the drawing room of a gentlemen's club. There were small tables with inlaid chessboards, sideboards with coffee, candies, refreshments of all kinds, stereopaints of notables of the City's history squirming on the walls. The head of the council, as of that hour, indicated a comfortable seat for Chandlie and gave him a cup of chilly sweet foam that was flavored with fruits and mint. He was a man. He looked about thirty, with neat bangs, wide-spaced tawny eyes, diffraction-grating rings on his fingers that moved hypnotically as he gestured. "Chandlie, he said, "we have a full file of reports. Beach sand, bits of weathered wood and caked salt have been found on your garments and on your skin, after

evaporating wash water. Stool analysis shows consumption of nearly raw vegetable foods. We then ordered a spectral study of your skin and found compensatory pigmentation of your arms, face, neck, and lower body compatible with exposure to unfiltered sunlight. There is no point in wasting our time, Chandlie. It is clear that you have been outside the City. The boy nodded and said, "Yes, I have been outside the City. He had thought carefully of what he should say when he was asked questions, for he was aware of the risks involved. Risks to himself, to some extent. His ambitions were not fully formed at that time, but they excluded being downgraded as a potential Dropout. Risks to the Dropouts themselves in a much more immediate way, of course. "What did you see outside?" asked the head of the council in a friendly and curious way, and all of the twenty-five, or almost all, stopped talking or reading to listen. "I saw a beach, cried Chandlie. "It was very strange. The Sun was so hot, the wind so strong. There were waves a meter and a half high that came in and crashed on the sand. I walked in the water, I found berries. They did not taste very good, but I ate them. There were buildings made of wood and, I think, plaster? He was asked to describe the buildings; he did so. He was asked why he was there; he told them it was curiosity. Finally he was asked, very gently. "And did you see any people? At once he replied: "Of course, there were some women in the corpse-disposal area. I think someone they knew had died. And a man adjusting some Handy's. "No, said the head of the council, "we mean outside. Did you see anyone there?" Chandlie looked astonished. "How could anyone live there?" he asked. "No. I didn't see anyone. The head of the council, after a while, looked around at the others. He held up seven fingers inquiringly. Most of them nodded, some shrugged, a few were paying no attention at all. "You have seven demerits. Chandlie, he said, "and you will work them off as the proctors direct. At once Chandlie was enraged. "Seven! he cried. "How unfair! It was maddening that they should have believed him and still awarded so harsh a punishment, seven days without free time, or seven weeks with no optional-foods privileges, or seven of whatever the proctors judged would be most punitive, and therefore most likely to discourage repetition of the infractions, for him. Before he left he was in tears, which only resulted in two additional demerits. He was then returned to his peer group, who gradually accepted him again as before.

For more than twenty years Chandlie kept the secret of the Dropout colony outside Edge City. He did not return there in all that time. But he did not speak of it, not even to Marda, by whom he did indeed conceive a child at the appropriate time. As a child he accumulated very few further demerits, and as a young adult none. His conduct was a model to the entire city and particularly, almost offensively, to his peer group, who reluctantly but inevitably elected him their age representative when he was almost thirty. It was then, with a seat on the council, that he achieved his intention. He disclosed the full truth of his expedition outside the City. He denounced the former councilpersons for their failure to recognize when a little boy was lying. He accused them of suspecting that there was indeed a Dropout colony at the edge of Edge City, and proposed that he himself be given the authority to deal with it. Angrily the ones he had denounced left, refusing to vote. Resentfully the ones who remained gave him the authority. He then in person, in person, he himself, went outside, himself directing the armed Pals with their lasers and serrated steel fangs. The weathered buildings burned sullenly but surely as the heat of the lasers drove out the long accumulation of brine. The Dropouts screamed and ran before the Pals snapping at them. Some escaped, but not very many. A crew of Handys was set to repairing and strengthening the walls around the food input areas, so that in the event any Dropouts returned they would be unable to continue their pilferage. When Chandlie reentered the City, there was nothing left outside that was alive, or useful. The following year he was elected head of the council years before his turn, and several times again. This had been his intention. He knew that he could not have achieved this so soon if it had not been for the Dropouts. In a sense he remained forever grateful to them. Sometimes he wondered if any of them were still alive in whatever part of the scarred and guarded Earth they had fled to. In a way he hoped some were. It would have been useful to know of another Dropout colony, although he really had no particular interest in harrying them, unless, of course, he could see a way in which it would benefit his career.