

A Boy and his God

(Length: 4500 words approximately)

Once upon a time Howie had a god. It lived in the kennel where Juniper the mongrel had stayed until he died the winter before. Howie's mom Sophie was of the opinion that a pet god represented better value for money. After all, it didn't wake you up barking whenever the postwoman came by. And you didn't have to have a licence for one, either.

Howie was inconsolable when Juniper died. They'd grown up together, been playmates for all of Howie's twelve years, and though Howie never did learn to wag his tail -- or Juniper to do his sums -- they understood one another perfectly. He sobbed and wailed and wept rivers when Juniper was run over, and sulked all March until Fred Phillips said to his wife, "Don't you think it's about time we got something to replace Juniper?"

Sophie Phillips rolled her eyes. "Pooper-scooper, she muttered; flea powder, bath time, walks in the rain. Are you crazy?"

Do not be deceived; it wasn't that Sophie didn't like animals. She loved them; she'd been so crazy about Juniper that having to take him to the vet had broken her heart. It wasn't the worming and the whining that worried her, but the thought of going through the trauma of the accident again. Her husband realised this, and being who he was he waited impatiently until she pushed her reading glasses up the bridge of her nose with one finger, and -- knowing that at such a moment she would be distracted enough to pay full attention -- he asked the fateful question; "Yes, but why don't we get him something else? A god, for instance?"

Sophie looked at him questioningly, and in that moment of locked gazes they thought with one mind: and their thought was this. *Hounds die on you, hounds need toilet training, hounds mean hassle; but household gods are trouble-free. What could go wrong with a minor deity?*

She nodded significantly. "I think it's time we went for a little drive," she said, looking at Howie. Howie's eyes were downcast as he dug his spoon into his shreddies with a desultory action perfected long ages ago in the salt mines; Fred cleared his throat loudly, and Howie looked up.

"Your mother was speaking to you, said Fred. What do you say?"

"Aw ... what?" Howie spooned another mouthful of cereal, playing for time. Sophie smiled tenderly at him. Fred was of the opinion that she spoiled Howie silly but he kept his mouth shut. Sophie had a degree in child psychology and Fred was in awe of it.

"Your mother said something," he repeated.

Howie shifted his gaze from the direction of the demonic abyss -- which lay somewhere below the floor of his cereal bowl and somewhere above the planes of Hades, according to the Dungeons and Dragons book he'd got for Christmas -- and refocussed on Mom's face. "Yo?" he asked, with all the charm and tact of a pre-teen bulldozer.

My, but they grow up fast these days, Mom thought admiringly, looking forward to adolescent sulks and no need to have to work at bringing him up any more. "We're going for a little drive, she said brightly; your father and I agreed that it would be a good idea. It's about time, after all. Since Juniper ..."

"What?" Howie looked at her, spoon poised in mid air. A thin trickle of dirty milk dribbled back into his

bowl as his hand sagged under the weight of his curiosity.

"It's time we took you to temple," said Mom. "We're going to buy you a God."

You sell pets through a pet shop, but for Gods you have to go to Temple. Temple was downtown, a sprawling great drive-in cathedral city that stank of incense and resounded with the noise of striking gongs, booming drums, chanting acolytes -- recorded, of course -- and human sacrifice.

The complex sprawled because you have to keep gods well apart. Being fiercely territorial, gods tend to fight violently and utter the most fearsome curses on sight of a potential rival; and besides, real estate was cheap downtown. They'd built minarets up either side of the entrance boulevard -- very phallic, Sophie thought -- and as she pulled the Toyota up at the gatehouse she shook her head and tut-tutted quietly to herself. *Terrible*, she thought, *exposing little boys to such oedipal archetypes! What can the architect have been thinking of?*

"Hiya," she called, head half out of the window; "Sophie Phillips and family. I phoned ahead, remember?"

"Pleased to meet you ma'am!" said the bronzed, grinning gatekeeper. "If you'd like to wait just a second we'll have one of our salesmen join you for your journey round our complex." He glanced over his shoulder. "Moon," he hissed. The smile slipped back into place with just a seconds' hesitation. "Minister Moon will be joining you presently, ma'am."

A door beside the window opened and a butterball oriental stepped out, face all glowing teeth and sunglasses above his hawaiian shirt. He walked round the car and Sophie unlocked one of the passenger doors. "Glad to meet you ma'am, name's Sunny Moon, but you can call me Sunny if you want! Hope you enjoy your visit here, have a nice day as well," he added, glancing nervously at her. Something about women in mirrorshades gave him a funny turn. He sat down gingerly on the other side of the back seat to Howie, who cast him a long, cool stare. Sophie nodded at the gatekeeper and slid the Buick into gear; then she moved off along the driveway.

"Here on your right we see the temple of the old Egyptian pantheon," Moon began, launching into his spiel. It was a huge, sand-weathered pyramid fronted by a temple. "All the way from Thoth the ibis-headed, especially good with academics and those interested in learning, to Osiris, god of the dead and judge of souls. Actually he's a bit patchy -- ever since his rival Set chopped him into lots of little pieces and lost them all over the Upper Nile. Tell the truth," Moon added confidentially, "I wouldn't recommend any of this mob to you; they're a bit clannish and you'll end up with heiroglyphics all over the bathroom walls and stacks of mummified cats in the cellar." He shut up as Mom nodded and drove on; like many a salesman before him, Moon had mastered the art of sizing up his client and was seducing her with his apparent objectivity before the Big Sell.

"Over there we see Valhalla, hall of dead heroes and home of the Norse deities. This lot are especially good with Scandinavian buyers, but they do tend to drink a lot and party at odd hours. Midnight sun, you know. We had a few Hells Angels the other week who seemed to think Loki would make a good mascot for their chapter, but they got kind of annoyed when he cheated at pool. Anyway."

Sophie Phillips drove on, even when the road curled around an outrageous nipple-shaped protrusion covered in the most intricate mosaics. "Here we have one of the more abstract deities, a kind of second cousin to that Jewish Big God Person. You can't actually see him but if you adopt him you get to lead a horde of millions of fanatical followers. He's big on marriage -- you can have up to four wives -- " he looked at Sophie and backtracked hastily " -- but you get your right hand chopped off for drinking and you have to pray to him five times a day." Mom glanced at him in the mirror and nodded, very slightly, as they drove on; Moon sweated. Howie slumped in the back seat, bored.

"Actually, most of the deities in this quadrant are a bit abstract for a kid," Moon chattered. "I'd think a young man like your son" -- he actually looked at Howie for the first time since getting into the car -- "would be more interested in something he could sort of relate to on a personal level. Now over here -- yeah, you want to take this left fork and carry on there, yes, into the tunnel -- we have a special deal this week. This is where we keep the Elder Gods. It's not so much that they're old stock as that most people want, well, something more familiar."

Sophie Phillips, to whom the words *more familiar* translated as *more expensive*, sat up straighter. The road disappeared into a hole in the ground, dropping smoothly until the raw stone arched overhead and covered them. There were no lamps; she switched the headlights on as she drove. The walls seemed to glisten with an invisible sheen of sweat, as if the weight above them was squeezing blood from the stones. This tunnel didn't look like a recent excavation; more like an ancient, dank, brooding gateway into some isolated network of caverns that had threaded the rocks under New England since long before European settlers first trod these shores. She removed her glasses, looked about, and sniffed. *Birth tunnel experience*, she thought. *How Freudian can you get?*

Moon, who had been silent for a few blissful moments, picked up his sales-pitch again. "Folks, you are now about to see the Elder Gods. This bunch are rather less sociably acceptable than some, they tend to slobber a bit and you've got to take care not to let them on the carpet. That said, an Elder God can make a faithful pet, an obedient servant, and a lifetime companion. Keep 'em somewhere shady in the back yard and water it when it doesn't rain. You won't get any trouble from rats or mice while you've got an Old One on the premises, and -- "

He shut up as Sophie hit the brakes. The tunnel debouched into a monstrous cavern, the centre of which was occupied by a circular black pool. Dark tunnel-mouths led off in all directions. The halogen glare of the headlights cast great shadows which imparted an air of instant, brooding menace to the turbid waters that lapped at the nearside tyres. Something about the pool spoke of ancient evil, of things left undisturbed since before the dawn of time, of an aura of necrotic decay that accounted for the stillness of the air in some bizarre, twisted manner.

"Kill the lights", said Moon. Sophie complied. The darkness was not complete; overhead a myriad of toadstools cast their ghastly luminescence across the surface of the pond, reflecting like distant, unnameably ancient stars in a cosmos no human eye was meant to see. Moon wound down the window. "Cthulhu!" he roared. "Here Boy! Fish!"

Reaching into a pocket he pulled out something that glistened faintly in the ghost-light. He cast it far out into the pool, where it sank with a sickly plop that spread no ripples on the surface. "Squid", he whispered by way of explanation; "always brings him."

Fred clutched at Sophie's arm. "Is this wise?" he ventured. "I mean, if anything happened ..."

"No problem!" she answered determinedly. "They're chicken, are gods. Can't stand up to a determined atheist, not a-one of them. You'll see!" Howie sat up attentively and looked out the window. A smile began to tug at his lips; a smile of anticipation.

A ripple appeared on the surface of the lake, a ripple which rapidly grew wider and higher as if some unspeakable bulk was rising up from a slumber of aeons, deep on the floor of some miles-deep rift in the continental bedrock. There was an ominous breeze blowing, as if the very air was being displaced from the cavern; then something, shapeless and huge, monstrous beyond belief and twice as ugly, began to rear itself from the centre of the lake. Howie gaped at it in frank adoration.

Sophie took one look in her mirror and changed her mind. "Big sucker, isn't he?" she said; "bet there isn't

room for him in our fishpond!" She slipped the Buick into gear with a jolt, and they disappeared off up the next side tunnel with Howie still struggling to control his disappointment.

Behind them, Cthulhu continued his monumental rise from his far-drowned bed. His spine was so tall that it took whole minutes for a command to travel the length of all those synapses; he often took so long to stop sitting up that he bumped his head on the ceiling. He saw twin red lights vanishing up a tunnel that his memory said led to the abode of his cousin Shub-Niggurath. Ponderously he swung his oversized, misshapen abomination of a head to look after them; tentacles drooped and squirmed from his pulp y lower lip as he examined Moon's squid, clutched in one unspeakable appendage. He shook his head. *So long*, he rumbled; *cheapskates!*

Eventually Sophie and Fred bargained their prodigal down to one -- just one -- child of the unspeakable Shub-Niggurath, father of the woods and eternal spawner of obscene life forms in his root-roofed cavern beneath the rolling green hillsides around Arkham City. It took dire threats and the promise of fish for supper every night for a week to forestall the promised tantrum and flood of tears that greeted Sophie's outright refusal to countenance a Cthulhu. Fred even threatened to buy Howie a beaming fat Buddha if he didn't behave himself; this latter threat seemed to do the trick. "That's cute," he spat as if the very suggestion brought images of saintly abstinence to mind.

"Here's your very own user-manual," said Moon, beaming as he handed Howie a leatherbound copy of the Necronomicon; "remember, Old Ones don't like sunlight, they need a plentiful supply of water and a bit of fresh blood from time to time, and don't let it get at the neighbours' daughter. You know, the girl next door? Good boy! Have a nice day!"

He continued beaming even as the sweating porters levered the tarpaulin-draped crate into the back of the car and Sophie signed the Amex voucher. His smile only slipped when he saw the happy family drive away. He shook his head dolefully. "There goes another one, Ron, he said. Misers don't wanna know about the big stuff ..."

"Well hell, ya got to hand it to them," said Ron, propping his feet up on the desk and putting down his pen -- Ron fancied himself as a writer of science fiction -- "at least they took it off of our hands! Now you --" he jabbed his fingers at Moon -- "when're you gonna take advantage of our staff discount scheme?" He winked, an affected nautical mannerism that irritated the hell out of Moon.

Moon considered. "Well, there's this contemporary goddess I've been thinking about recently," he said. "Name of Norma Jean ..."

The Phillips family arrived home and the installation of Shub-junior -- or Junior as he rapidly became known -- proceeded smoothly. Juniper's kennel was the obvious home, given Junior's glutinous propensities, and Fred insisted that Mom lay down the law before Howie could go play with his new pet.

"Remember," said Mom, finger poised before her face; "Junior's not to get on the carpet! Your Dad will have a fit if he sees goop all over the staircase, and he's not allowed in the kitchen either. You'll have to walk him at night; and remember you mustn't pray to him. That's almost as bad as sacrificing."

"Why can't I pray to him if I want to?" demanded Howie, staring up at Sophie and trying to figure what Junior would make of his new red skateboard.

"You musn't ever worship a God," she said; "it's very important. If you worship them they get more and more powerful until they start telling you to do unreasonable things. Once everybody worshipped their gods, and things were really bad. Only now we know better." She grinned with satisfaction, speculating about her son's need for a pre-adolescent bonding ritual.

Howie picked his nose, deeply puzzled. Surely you needed two legs to balance on a skateboard ..?
"Yes, but if I can't worship my very own god, what can I pray to?" he asked.

"Conspicuous consumption," said Fred, backing into the kitchen with a heap of frozen microwave apple pies on a tray. "Gods all promise jam tomorrow; at least this way you get to have your cake and eat it!"

He laughed as he tied on his apron. "You just go play with your deity," he said. "Lunch in twenty, right?"

After their first ecstatic bonding, Howie and Junior were as inseparable as any boy and god could be. On many summer evenings you could look outside after dusk and see the two of them bounding along the sidewalk, Howie weaving his skateboard from side to side and Junior racing to and fro across front lawns, gibbering and leaving a thin trail of slime in his efforts to keep up. Sometimes they swapped, and Howie would jog along huffing and puffing while Junior rumbled after him on the 'board. As they passed the neat white picket fences lining the road, hounds would bark frantically and cats would spit from the cover of bushes; but Howie didn't care. At school he would look at his fellow fifth-graders with a gleam in his eye; *I bet your pet can't ride a skate board*, he would sneer to himself. And it was true. This was a small town, and skateboarding elder gods were as thin on the ground as hang-gliding rabbis.

The summer recess stretched into a halcyon period of long, hot evenings and quiet, starlit nights. Sometimes during the early hours, Howie would be awakened by the noise of scraping from the back yard. Junior was quite smart for a deity, and had mastered the art of letting himself out whenever he felt like going for a midnight ramble. He was always back by dawn though, and nobody mentioned the matter unless Junior was careless and left a manhole cover open by mistake.

But the year rolled on towards autumn, and that September Howie was due to start sixth grade. He didn't want to go back to school -- *Aw, mom*, -- what kid does? But he had to.

"Look Howie, it's nothing big," Mom told him on the first morning of term. "Everybody has to go through it. Look at me -- I was at school once, you know? And look what it made of me!" Howie looked up at her through the wrong end of a conceptual telescope. He was still of an age when cause and effect were confusing.

"But I don't want to know all about Nietzsche or Sartre," he complained; "they got funny names and Miz Jones laughs at me when I, when I --" he subsided into gasps of outrage at the very thought that he might mispronounce their names to entertaining effect.

"There, there!" soothed Mom. "You'll see, it's not that bad! If you don't learn about existential philosophy and logical positivism in school, how can you expect to earn a living in this world? What'll you do when you grow up?" She picked him up and hugged him, grunting slightly with the effort -- Howie was turning into a big boy, just like his father -- and looked him in the eye. "And don't you worry about Miss Jones. I'm sure she doesn't mean anything, but if she does ... well, your mom used to be a mud-wrestler, right?" She swung him in a loop until he laughed like crazy and struggled, then set him down again. "Now eat your shreddies, dear! Have you fed Junior today?"

"Naw," he said sullenly. "Dad said he would."

Anyway, it fell to Sophie to drive Howie to school and drop him off there with all the other kids. Howie had by this time convinced himself that he was going to have an awful day, so indeed he did; existentialism had nothing on his angst, which expressed itself to the full when Candy Jessup, who had freckles and red hair and a brace and sat behind him, tugged his pigtail when Miss Jones wasn't looking. It was a lesson about Descartes, so it probably didn't happen anyway. Howie turned round and snarled at her, quietly and with awesome ferocity: "I've got a skateboarding god who bites and I'm going to set him on you after school, so there!"

"Ooh." Candy screwed her face up around an 'O' of a mouth and looked ever so faintly amused. "Kiddie's got a pet god, has he? Wanna put your god up against my pit bull terrier?" She grinned mockingly and Howie noticed some things about her; mascara and lipstick and a black leather jacket. Candy was growing up, already apeing her elders, and she hung out with a bunch of older girls.

He was about to come out with a crushing rejoinder when an iron pair of fingers clamped themselves to the back of his neck and forcibly rotated his head. "And what have we got here?" asked Miss Jones, in her Number Two (scathing) tone of voice. "A silly -- shake -- little -- rattle -- boy, not paying attention in class!"

Ouch. Yes, very silly. Howie looked up and Miss Jones looked down with all the conciliatory charm of a rattlesnake. "And what have you got to say for yourself?" she asked, the personification of steely retribution. The room fell silent around her, for all the world loves an execution. "Talking in class, idle chatter, and not paying attention. Do you know what happens if you stop paying attention?" she boomed.

Howie winced in anticipation. "You stop existing?" he asked hesitantly. *Thwack!* came the sound of a smart clip round the ear.

"Guess again", Miss Jones said drily as she returned to the front of the class and retrieved her chalk. "Now as I was saying ..."

The day dragged on into dystopian distemper for Howie, and when the bell finally rang he ran out into the afternoon sunlight as fast as he could. That was a mistake. Candy's gang was hanging out just past the gate, and they were all there waiting for him; Bernice and Lilly the Pink and Tarantula deVille who was heavily into black lace and studs; and the big, sullen one they all called Helen J. *Uh oh*, he thought, but he wasn't tempted to repeat his solipsistic experiment out here, not after his disastrous failure to dispell Miss Jones that morning. He steeled himself as he walked towards them.

"Hiya kiddy," shouted Candy. "Think I don't exist, huh?"

Oh shit, he thought. *I think, therefore I'm not here ...*

"Yeah, kid," drawled Bernice, crop haired number two to Candy's El Presidente pose, she who was by right lawful custodian of the gang ghetto blaster which even now perched upon a wall, overloading with transients from something ominously hardcore; "you wanna mess with us?" She pushed herself away from the wall with a swing of her ample hips and shambled towards him like a great irritated bear. Tarantula deVille leered at him and went back to preening long black fingernails that glinted ominously in the sunlight.

"You and whose army?" Howie swore, looking round desperately. There at the other end of the street was mom's Buick, rounding the corner with light gleaming from the chrome. "Hey, gotta go," he sang out; "less you want my mom to jump on you!" He turned and sped across the road. If wishes were fishes, he ruminated, his dinner'd be awfully boring.

It was dad behind the steering wheel. "Your mom's going to be home late," he said brightly as they pulled away from the turbulent stormclouds of adolescent experience. "She's staying over at the office; there's some kind of problem come up."

"Uh-huh," said Howie, musing on his close escape. Dad drove on, chopping lanes and booting the gas pedal as if a politician was after his vote.

"Howie," he said presently, "was that a bunch of girls I saw you playing with just then?"

"Uh-huh," he replied.

Dad cleared his throat; "How many times have I told you ..." he changed track ... "what will all the other boys in class say? Do you want them to think you're interested in *girls*?"

Howie, who *did* want them to think that (because it was a kind of grown-up thing to do), and who wasn't about to tell Dad of all people just what he'd been doing with those girls -- or about to have had done to him -- kept his mouth zipped. "Aw, Dad," he whined.

"Don't you aw Dad me, young man," said Fred, who was bitterly afraid that Howie was going to disappoint him. His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel at the thought of Howie growing his hair long and having his ears pierced and enslaving himself voluntarily before the juggernaut of bizarre fashions, all in the interests of catching a member of the opposite sex. "It's not healthy, Howie. If you go on like this your mom is going to have to take you to see the doctor, you know that? You naughty boy! And at your age too!" He resolved to talk to Mom about this, later, in private. Howie rolled his eyes but kept quiet. When they got home Dad made it obvious that he was in the doghouse, so he went into the backyard to relate to Junior. He curled up in the corner of the kennel and Junior leaned up against him and gibbered affectionately to the beat of his cassette player. Howie ran fingers through his slimy palps and toyed with one of his longer tentacles until Junior rolled over and presented his dryish tongue to be scratched, but nothing Junior did could shift his master's depression. Eventually the tape came to the end, so Howie flipped sides and pressed playback before Junior could sit up and beg; he seemed to have a thing about the Dead Kennedys, which was okay by Howie.

"It's awful," he sighed. "Miss Jones won't go away if I ignore her, whatever she says, and Candy pulled my pigtail and was horrible to me and her gang're going to beat me up and what'm'I goin' to **DO**, Junior? Answer me that, mm? Gonna get stomped by girls and Dad thinks I'm hanging around and I'm unhappy. Watcha gonna do?"

Burble, said Junior.

Now Howie had listened when mom told him why not to pray to Junior, but it seemed to him that if he ever needed a friend it was now. Mom didn't take him to the doctor, but bottles of little white pills appeared in the bathroom cabinet and she kept after him with injunctions to keep taking his vitamins so he'd grow up to be a big boy. Howie did -- all the way to Junior, who developed quite a taste for stanozolol and androsterone. Howie stopped hanging about late and taking his time leaving school, so even though Candy carried on pulling his pigtail and whispering obscene, lascivious suggestions in his ear when Miss Jones wasn't looking he didn't get beat up. Not yet, anyway.

When they'd bought him, Junior had been about the size of a large terrier. He was growing large on a diet of red meat, anabolic steroids and prayer. He slept with his tentacles in the open air, twitching faintly as he dreamed of whatever it is Elder Ones dream of; on more and more nights he sneaked stealthily out of his kennel and down the manholes, until the public health inspectors came to look at the sewers and scratched their heads in wonder and pronounced the town rat-free for the first time in living memory. Mom had to get out her saw and enlarge the kennel opening.

"He just growed," Howie confided to his friends at school -- 'Fingers' Freddy and The Worm, who oohed and aahed appreciatively. Neither of them had a god, although The Worm had a pet snake which spent most of its time asleep and didn't notice if you prayed to it. It didn't grow either, nor did it gibber at the full moon and rattle its tentacles on the picket fences when it went skateboarding with Howie. Howie had an old walkman from when he was a kid, and he rigged it so that the headphones fit a couple of Junior's orofices -- whether they were ears or not he wasn't certain, but they sure looked funny and Junior seemed to like it -- so that he could listen to the Dead Kennedys as he rolled down the sidewalk

on his red skateboard. Yes, even if Howie was unhappy and uncertain at school his pet god was doing just fine; he even had a worshipper, and what more can any self-respecting deity ask than that?

(Lots, actually.)

As autumn wore on, the nights grew longer. Candy tormented him intermittently, asked him to go out with her then had a good laugh at him with her gang when he refused out of knock-kneed terror. Going out with her, while not a totally repulsive prospect, would expose him to the Gang ... and girls in gangs are utterly different to girls on their own. So she continued to pull his pigtail in class -- almost coyly, as if to retain his interest -- and hang out downtown at night.

Late one afternoon, Miss Stead -- who was, if anything, more fearsome than Miss Jones -- lectured them about the evils of logical positivism. She closed her big textbook with a thud and a spurt of dust, just as the bell rang. "Now go and be good children and read chapter seven before your next lesson, all of you!" she said. "And remember that the test next Tuesday will cover Bertrand Russell and the post-Godelian numerotheologists!" Candy yawned elaborately behind Howie: who didn't look round, so he didn't see that her brace had emigrated to leave a spotless bite and sultry lips that could have graced a film star. He packed his books and stood up, then Candy grabbed him from behind.

"Hey!" he protested.

"Yeah?" she said. "You a kiddy, kiddy? Or are you a man?"

"I'm a boy!" he protested hotly. "I'll set my god on you --"

"Good," she said, tightening her grip round his throat playfully. "You wanna go to the pictures tonight?"

"I gotta walk Junior," he gasped.

"Aw, fuck." She pronounced it with the breathless reverence of one who had just discovered what the word meant and wondered if it was fun. "You're no good, Kiddy. Hey, I betcha you don't so have a god, anyway!" She let go of his throat and stepped back.

"I do too," he said trenchantly. "I pray to it as well!"

"Yoo hoo!" she whistled sarcastically. "A real gawd. You going to show me, kiddy?"

"If you want." Sullen now, Howie was beginning to see how this short-haired freckle-faced imp had outmanoeuvred him.

"Okay," she said. "See you tonight, right? Out by Fat Mac's."

"Hey, ah," he said, but she'd already gone, doubtless to tell her gang to be there or be square to see her seduce him or something ghastly. What was he going to do? His mind boggled.

That evening saw Howie in a real tizzy. He fiddled and put in his best earrings and pulled on his best levis and running shoes. Then he got out the skateboard and Junior obligingly hopped on and waited while Howie put on his headphones. "You're going to behave now, you hear me?" Howie prayed. "And everything's going to be right, right, 'cos you're going to make it right, right? A-men!" He pressed the play button and Junior belched to the beat of Holiday in Cambodia, rocked to Kalifornia Uber Alles, and waved his tentacles as Howie towed him out onto the sidewalk. In the dim light he seemed to glow with the repressed energy of prayers and steroids, vibrating and shimmering at the edges as if his skateboard was surfing through extraplanar realities in a cosmos too vast and terrible for human senses to comprehend.

(Actually, Junior was surfing through an n -dimensional spatial construct. Howie was lamentably blind to the cosmic influences of the higher planes; to the snowflakes of light that whirled in an everlasting blizzard through the vast spaces of infinite insanity: and to the window into emptiness which the power of his prayer had opened. Harmless in and of himself though Junior was, nevertheless something horrifying had been activated within his diminutive frame by the pernicious virus of belief. Steroid-fed and anarchic, a spirit of pure evil was growing, pulsing in time to the punk rock overspill which Howie had unknowingly attached to some of Junior's genitals in mistake for ears. As he was to discover ...)

Candy and her gang were hanging out at the crossroads MacRonalnds, stuffing their faces, when along the boulevard came the oddest sight any of them had ever seen. It wasn't so much the cute boy with the earings and blond hair and designer jeans that turned their heads -- although he got a wolf-whistle from Bernice -- but his companion who stunned them. A large, quivering lump of tentacles, claws, palps, lubricious orofices and quivering eye stalks was rare enough on these mean streets. To see this self-same lump riding a red perspex skateboard and listening to the Dead Kennedys on a walkman added a unique touch. Jaws dropped; fragments of masticated cow landed in the dirt, unnoticed.

"Shit", breathed Candy, with the reverence of the truly surprised. "Do you see where the headphones --" she stopped. Unlike Howie she didn't need labels for labia.

"Do you believe it?" drawled Tarantula deVille to her sister Mortitia, who'd come along for the ride. "The boy's balling a ball!" Mortitia sniggered knowingly, even though she was too young and naive to understand.

"Betcha he isn't," said Candy, captivated. The light of the setting sun sparkled fire through Howie's hair, and she just knew that he was an innocent young thing waiting for the hot taste of her lips to awaken passionate desires suppressed for too long by, by ... she shook her head, at a loss for adjectives. "Here, take this," she said, passing her hamburger remnants to Helen J., who looked at them in deep disgust (being a vegan). She swaggered out into the road, hips swinging and cowboy boots clacking on the blacktop, to meet her paramour and rival.

"Hiya kiddy," she said, chewing non-existent gum and looking him in the eye. "Glad ya could make it. Who's this here friend o' yours?"

Howie, for his part, stared at her, noticing for the first time that the brace was gone from her teeth, that her hair was short and extremely sexy, that he was male and she wasn't, and that despite all his mothers' conditioning (ideologically sound in view of the population explosion) he was still of heterosexual bent, and that his jeans were embarrassingly tight. "Uh," he said.

Candy bent over Junior, who bounced up and down on the board menacingly and clacked his -- or rather, her -- claws together. "Come on," she said, don't be coy! "Who are you?"

Gobble, said Junior; **grubble gurgle grunt snoo-oo-ork!** She bounced the front wheels of the board from side to side, nearly falling off it in her agitation.

"Hey," said Howie, "I think you've got Junior excited. Now you've seen him, what do you want?"

"Well," said Candy, swinging her hips suggestively, "you can come with me, hang out with the gang for a while, right? Maybe --" her eyes flickered from side to side -- "we could kiss. You want to be my boyfriend?"

"Ung," said Howie, who had half-expected an invitation to be her punchbag. Junior jumped up and down and the skateboard squeaked. He seemed to be getting awfully indignant about something, Howie realized through the haze of his disconcertion.

"Come on," coaxed Candy, taking his hand. "Come this way?"

Now the trouble was about to begin. It was about to begin because of a single technical problem; Howie's walkman didn't have auto-reverse. The tape had come to the end of the side, and Junior could hear everything. (The fact that Howie'd screwed the headphones into her genitals notwithstanding; sensitive skin, y'know, picks up vibrations.) Now it takes a lot to get an Elder God jealous, especially a very young, very inexperienced Elder God, but there's one lesson that all Gods are born knowing, and that's that once your worshippers get all starry-eyed and start making love all over the place you lose all hold over their guilt; and without guilt, where is the motive for prayer? For obedience? Junior thought she was about to be jilted, with good reason. And unlike a powerful Big God Person of days gone by, Junior had no priesthood to pronounce anathema upon the couple; so she/he/it decided to take matters into his/her/it's own claws/palps/tentacles.

Howie, entranced, turned his back upon Junior and revelled in the warm, tight grip of his very first girl-friend as she led him towards the lights and the company of her gang. As they reached the kerb, she stopped suddenly and turned, so that he found himself walking into her open arms. Surprise. They closed around him -- so unlike the choke-grip of classroom days -- and he found his lips touching something soft and yielding and moist and utterly different that seemed to promise the future to him. He didn't fight or struggle; it was too much fun.

Mortitia, who was too young for this, looked away disgustedly while her big sister grinned carnivorously and stretched her black claws out to the couple. Helen J. turned her back grumpily. So it happened that only Bernice noticed the skateboarding punk-rocker of an Elder God on anabolic steroids who was accelerating ominously towards them from way back down the boulevard, sparks grating from the skateboard wheels, squatting in a kind of schuss position and gnashing her ominously long, needle-sharp teeth. Junior glowed, glowed with the rage of a deity scorned, shone with the light of steroid-induced psychosis, the violent flare of martyrdom and a hundred bloody jihads as she rumbled down the street in a foaming of orofices and a clattering of lobster claws. And as Junior glowed she grew, bulking higher and broader and more hideous by the moment until she filled the road with a rushing wall of darkness that blotted out the sky and the stars and the promise of rescue.

SPLAT!

"That was Junior," said Howie, staring in disbelief at the enormous mass draped over the hood of the Mack truck that had been crossing the intersection at exactly the wrong time; "my god!"

"Well it sure as hell isn't any more," said Candy pragmatically. "It didn't look too friendly just then!"

"Yeah," said Howie, mouth still adroop and heart pummeling his ribs into submission. "What d'you suppose got into him?"

"A touch --" she goosed him -- "of jealousy. Come on?"

But Howie didn't move. He looked at the mess in the road and shook his head. "Do you believe it?" he murmured to himself; "there went my walkman and my best ole Dead Kennedys tape!" He shook his head again but, to his surprise, he didn't shed a tear. Gods have always preyed on ignorance; and Howie, as he turned his back on it, had more important things to think about.