

Are You Sure You're Looking in the Right Universe?

by

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Outside the shimmering stratosphere of the Earth stretches an infinite cosmos. Here, orbs of light don't simply twinkle – they stare back at you. They illuminate an inconceivable multitude of planets, asteroids, suns and moons. But look further - far, far above all of this, is a place where mysterious creatures known as *gods* reside. These creatures keep watch over the worlds they have created; most with tenderness, others with love, some with fear. To us mere mortals this place is simply emptiness, blackness, nothingness.

And floating in that nothingness... was Gary.

Gary had many names; Allah, Elohim, Jehovah - but he hated all of them. Despite his best efforts to get 'Flint' to catch on, Gary was the name that stuck.

Gary sighed into the ethereal equivalent of a cup of tea and stared back at the distant stars.

"I've lost it again," he mumbled miserably.

Veritas, who also had many names but couldn't for the life of her remember them all, struggled not to roll her eyes. Gary was the sort of being that spent more time staring tragically out at metaphorical rain than *breathing*, and her infinite patience was wearing thin.

She managed to shake her head sympathetically, “Oh dear - when did you last see it?”

Gary sniffed, “They’ll all have a big laugh at this, won’t they. *Gary’s forgotten where he parked his world again* – good old Gary, always good for a laugh is old Gary. What will **Hades, God of the Underworld** think of this?”

It was the sort of name that required both the bold font and the dramatic pause. Nowadays, it just rolled off the tongue.

“Oh, they don’t all say that.”

Veritas had a particular talent – she could always tell when someone was lying. Somehow, that didn’t stop her from fibbing like a guilty toddler at every opportunity. Gary gave her a flat look and she continued hurriedly.

“Really though, what does it matter? You can turn the tides of worlds with only a thought, plunge entire solar systems into darkness with a clench of your fist – why do you care what **Hades, God of the Underworld** thinks of you?”

The thing was, Gary liked **Hades, God of the Underworld**. He liked him a *lot* - but he wasn’t about to tell Veritas that. He still had his pride, and pride that had survived through a millennia of accidental ice-ages was strong indeed.

“I *don’t*,” he pouted, “Do you know what happened last time I lost it? Something called *Trump*. It was *horrible*.”

“I *did* hear about that...”

“It’s not like it could have moved by *itself*,” he spared a glance up at Veritas,
“...Could it?”

“Of course not. Are you sure you’re looking in the right universe? It’s an easy mistake to make, they all look the same.”

He barely heard her. A paranoid little thought had been triggered in the back of his mind; “You think someone *e/se* might have moved it?”

She frowned incredulously, “Well *no*, not really - why in the infinite worlds would someone do *that*?”

Gary rubbed his hands together, shaking his head, thoughts racing ahead of him, “It must be Thor! He’s been trying to take my world for *millennia*! Come on, I need your help!”

Gods didn’t really travel. For them, moving lightyears was quicker than a thought – a thought always accompanied by the unmistakeable sound of a baby crying.

“What’s it even crying about?”

“It’s just a constant of the universe, don’t worry about it.”

They arrived in a world of order, structure, and towering piles of paperwork taller than the pyramids of Giza. Thor was a god of strength, storms... *fertility*, for some absurd reason... and as far as Gary was concerned his greatest talent was

having a stick jammed up his ass. He'd tried to poach his world off him more than a few times, claiming it was for '*its own good.*'

"*Who dares enter my domain?*" the man barked the moment Gary entered, not turning from the countless maps strung up around the war camp he stood in.

His golden armour and equally golden hair glinted importantly in the candlelight, and he had to raise his voice over the distant sounds of fighting.

"Ah, Gary. What can I do for you at this hour?" Thor shot a cold, icy glare over his shoulder, "*Without an appointment.*"

Gary made the effort to look intimidating, a tall order against a man who literally controlled thunder.

"My world appears to have *gone missing.* Would you know anything about that?"

Thor let out a giant, booming laugh. It was the sort of laugh that was both expansive and obnoxious enough to fill a small country, "You lost it! Of course! If you had left that world with *me*, this would never have happened."

Veritas rolled her eyes next to him, "Right, because all *your* worlds are perfect."

He seemed perplexed by the question, "Of course they are. I would settle for nothing less. Any world that is not perfect is dropped into the black hole."

Veritas looked at Gary with a sigh, "Well, he's not lying."

"He throws his worlds into a *black hole?*"

“No – I mean yes, he does, but - about *your* world. He doesn’t have it.”

“Of course I don’t,” Thor said, puffing up his chest like a peacock displaying its feathers, “I do not lie. It is dishonourable. You should speak to someone who is not honourable.” His nose wrinkled, “Such as Set.”

Gary snapped his fingers suddenly, “*Set!* Of course! She’s always trying to nick my things!”

Another thought and another sound of a baby screeching later, they arrived at Set’s world. Set had only recently been granted a world, so it was still finding its feet; fuelled by chaos and wrath, more unstable and more unfriendly than a black hole choking down a still-burning sun. Raging fires flickered in the distance and fights tumbled out of broken-down taverns. Unknown creatures hissed at them out of shadowed trees, and the air was so hot water steamed out of mortal’s hands as they tried to quench their thirst. Set sat atop a giant tower made from the backs of slaves, lounging upon a throne of stripped bone, cushioned by piles of fur and flesh. She smiled imperiously out over her creation as if she... well, as if she owned it.

Gary resented that. He was a firm believer in the ‘hands-off’ approach when it came to ruling worlds. He had better things to do, anyway. Like... watching the universe go by, he supposed...

He shook off the moment of existential dread and blamed it on Set, “*You!* You stole my world!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Set gave a theatrical sigh and took a sip of what Gary could only hope was red wine, “Why would I want to steal your dingy little world, Gary?”

“You stole Atlantis that time,” he snapped, “What’s to stop you from stealing the rest of it?”

Gary always thought she should have been disciplined for that – had her galaxy’s sun taken away for a few days or something – but she got away with everything because of the whole ‘*chaos*’ thing. *Favouritism, more like.*

She didn’t try to disguise the wolfish smile, “I was foolish back then, Gary. A young, naïve deity with not even a world to her name,” after a moment’s consideration she gave the cowering mortal she was using as a footstall a kick and he tumbled down into blackness, “I’ve *changed*.”

He turned to Veritas, who shrugged, “She’s telling the truth.”

“However, I *do* know who has it,” Set said idly, a soft smirk forming on her lips, **“Hades, God of the Underworld.”**

“I just don’t get it. What would **Hades, God of the Underworld** want with my world?”

Gary was trying to pluck up the courage to take those few extra-planar steps that would take them to the Underworld. In the meantime, he thought it only right to complain.

“I honestly don’t know, Gary,” Veritas was looking at him strangely, “He’s usually not interested in the living.”

“Exactly! He gets all my mortals sooner or later, why bother? He must be...” he sighed, and felt his shoulders droop, “I guess he must be messing with me.”

He felt a delicate hand on his shoulder and he leaned into it wretchedly.

“I don’t know...” he muttered, “I just thought he was different.”

Veritas spoke firmly, “Things need to change, Gary. You’ve been miserable lately, and pinning all your hopes on one deity is *not* healthy. I say we walk in there and tell him *exactly* what we think of him.”

“I swear that baby threw up on me.”

“How can it? It’s only figurative.”

“Smell *that* and tell me it’s not vomit.”

This time, it took slightly longer than a thought to get to. The river ran in seven circles and even Gary and Veritas had to be careful not to touch the water – death was only for mortals, but pain was a different story. They edged their way past Grief,

Hunger and Fear and shoved their way through the Gorgons and the Harpies, finally reaching the epicentre of the Underworld.

Gary's palms tingled with cold sweat and his teeth worried his bottom lip until it was red raw. He felt betrayed. He really *did* like **Hades, God of the Underworld**. As previously mentioned, he liked him a *lot*. They'd spoken a few times at inter-universal conferences, office parties, things like that – and Gary had been working up the nerve to ask him out for *decades*. But apparently he'd been wrong about him. Yet another god trying to steal his world. Yet another god who thought he was a joke.

And sure enough, there, floating eerily in the cavernous black fires of hell, was Gary's world. A swell of relief filled him – not a country or cloud out of place! The heat from the underworld's fire was even enough to keep it warm! It would be difficult to get the smell of burnt flesh out, and the inhabitants *might* suffer a few decades of latent feelings of anxiety, but otherwise...

The familiar sound that heralded the deity's arrival made Gary turn. It provoked a feeling akin to the noise of a thousand tortured people screaming, goosebumps racing down the back of the neck - but in actuality was more like the sound of a pin falling. **Hades, God of the Underworld** edged out from behind the smoking tendrils of a lost soul. His shoulders, usually concrete under the weight of countless souls, seemed to be straining. His gaze, usually unerringly steady, darted from side to side.

An angry flush crept into Gary's cheeks, "Were you trying to make fun of me?"

The deity rolled his eyes and made an awkward noise at the back of his throat, “*Don’t be* – if I was trying to *make fun* of you, I’d stick your world on top of your head while you ran around like a headless chicken looking for it-”

Sudden rage made Gary’s hands clench into shaking fists, “You’re just like the others, aren’t you?” his voice was surprisingly strong when it came out, a low growl that shook the very foundations of a country by his left hip, “I thought you were different, but you just think I’m an *idiot*-”

Hades, God of the Underworld held up his hand.

Everything stopped.

It wasn’t a talent like Veritas’, or even anything supernatural – it was just that when **Hades, God of the Underworld** tells the universe to be quiet, it doesn’t even wait to apologise.

Despite this, the deity looked uncomfortable. He lowered his hand quickly, scowling to himself.

“Look, I... don’t really know how to say this, alright? Usually I just throw whoever makes me *feel* things into the Field of Punishment but...” He blushed.

Hades, God of the Underworld *blushed*, “...I wanted to talk to you, and this was the best idea I had at the time.”

Gary paused. A few lonely screams drifted up from the river behind him.

“...You wanted to talk to me?” Gary finally shook his head, “*No-one* wants to talk to me!”

Hades, God of the Underworld's face was scarlet, "...I want to talk to you. Very much."

"He's telling the truth," Veritas said, softly.

They watched each other. Here, time didn't really exist. Time was very much a mortal construct. But even omnipotent beings felt the clock ticking when two people stared at each other and said absolutely nothing.

"Oh, come on boys!" Veritas yelled, "We haven't got all millennia!"

The great thing, Gary thought, was that they did.

"You know, um... I always thought you looked good with smoke behind you."

Hades, God of the Underworld smirked, "I think you will, too."

And with the mystery solved, all was well with the world.

At least, Gary assumed so. He suddenly had far better things to do than check.