

Fifty Shades of Judson Sunday School

Anastasia Steele, a rather ordinary, guileless, somewhat clueless young English major, scowled with frustration at her reflection in the glass panels of the Thompson Street door. "Damn my hair - it just won't behave, and damn Katherine Kavanagh for being ill and subjecting me to this ordeal. I should be studying for my final exams, which are next week, yet here I am, having to interview someone who calls himself the 'Grand Poobah.'" Anastasia knocked on the door, just above the "Beware of Judson Sunday School" sign.

At that moment, he appeared: six feet tall, wafer-thin, with Medusa-Harpo Marx-Shirley Temple-like hair, and eyes so blue, Anastasia found herself fighting an uncontrollable urge to immediately start having babies so she could give them to Jesus.

"Ms. Steele?"

"Yes."

"Welcome to Judson Sunday School. Please come in."

Anastasia hesitated. She could feel herself being pulled into the orbit of this enigmatic aristocrat with peculiar tastes and dark secrets. "Do I dare leave my tawdry, secular existence behind for who knows what this man, this seductive Grand Poobah has in store?" she asked herself. "I do dare! I do dare!" she exclaimed inside her head, and she stepped forward, crossing the threshold of the exciting, yet mysterious world of Judson Sunday School.

"I was thinking we could conduct our interview here in the Garden Room," he said.

"Why do you call it the 'Garden Room'? I don't see a garden."

"It's a long story."

"What's in this room?" Anastasia inquired, pointing to a closed door off to the side.

"Why, that's where we keep the toys."

"Toys?" Anastasia queried, a little too excitedly.

"Yes, it's our preschool Sunday School classroom," said the suave Grand Poobah. "Would you like to see it?"

Anastasia bit her lip. "Mmm mmm."

The Grand Poobah opened the preschool door, revealing a room filled with dolls and dinosaurs and blocks and a pretend kitchen and a playhouse and more stuffed animals than Anastasia could ever have dreamed. Her inner goddess began jumping up and down, clapping her hands like a five-year-old.

The ever-smooth, and did I mention skinny, Grand Poobah pointed to the kiddie table. "Why don't we sit here?" he crooned.

Anastasia crossed another threshold to the preschool table and sat down on one of the red chairs, which wasn't easy because, after all, they're for kids.

"I've never been in a room like this before," she purred. "What goes on in here?"

The long-legged, rail thin Grand Poobah sat himself down across from the coed.

"Intangible gifts," he replied with a smile.

Anastasia blushed. "Why, Grand Poobah, whatever could you mean by 'intangible'?"

"*Invisible, evanescent, elusive.* I thought you said you were an English major?"

"I am," she huffed, suddenly unsure if she wanted to spend the rest of her days with the beanstalk-figured Grand Poobah after all.

"'Intangible Gifts' is the theme of our youngest Sunday School curriculum for this year. This week's lesson is entitled 'The Intangible Gift of Pie.' The kids will learn about the importance of turning our enemies into friends as they read *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson and Tara Calahan King. Following the lesson, there will be apple pie for everyone, older kids included. All of the Sunday School parents should let me know if any of their children are allergic to apple pie."

"That sounds wonderful! I love apple pie!"

"We aim to please, Ms. Steele."

"So what do you have in store for your older children this weekend?"

The featherweight Grand Poobah responded. "We are continuing with our 'Miracle on West Fourth Street' series, providing our elemental, middling and high school students with the context they need before we eventually talk about the miracle stories of Jesus. Last week we read miracle stories from other religions - Islam, Hinduism and

Buddhism. This Sunday we will discuss the miracle stories of the Old Testament, particularly the prophet Elijah."

At the mention of his name, Anastasia's heart rose in her heaving chest like Elijah's chariot is said to have ascended to heaven in the Second Book of Kings, chapter two.

"I never knew Sunday School could be like this," Anastasia said. "Why, when I was a kid, I always found Sunday School to be rather painful."

"There's a very fine line between pleasure and pain, Ms. Steele. They are two sides of the same coin, one not existing without the other."

"Hunh?"

"Never mind."

"What do you think?" asked the lanky, spindly, twig-like man of God. "Is Judson Sunday School for you?"

Anastasia could feel her heart melting. She knew she wanted this rangy, reedy, rickety man to take charge of her. "Sometimes you have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince," she thought.

"Yes! Yes! I want my Sunday School world to begin and end with you."

The almost emaciated Grand Poobah grinned and wrote down her email address.

"I'll be in touch, usually on Fridays. Just look for 'This Week At Judson Sunday School' to show up in your inbox. It's a bit long, but then again, you're worth it."