

Salt Water Sunday

EILEEN GIBBONS

It did not help when Andrew said that Great Salt Lake was famous for its sunsets. Lola had no objection to pretty things. She always kept a bunch of flowers on the piano (crepe paper ones in the winter) and she had an eye for calendar pictures nice enough to frame. Right now, back home, there was a beautiful picture of a sunset hanging above the bed. But real, live sunsets take time, and Lola could not remember when she had ever had the leisure to stand and watch the sun go down.

The reasons, open-mouthed with awe, stood nearby. Six blue-eyed children—thoroughbreds, she called them, because they descended on all sides from grandfathers with not less than three wives and two foreign missions apiece. And any one of them, from Joe, the oldest, who was already a third-year deacon, down to Wayne, barely visible behind the baby he clutched tightly in front of him, could give an impromptu talk in sacrament meeting, bear a vibrant testimony that the Mormon Church was true, and lead in family prayer for a full five minutes. Lola didn't think you risked these things for money. Yet here they were standing among their boxed belongings on a railroad trellis in the exact middle of Great Salt Lake.

Water as flat as an ironing board, as blue as the rim on her rinse tub, reached in all directions, and under her feet was a rough wooden platform. A handful of buildings that looked as if they had been washed in by a wave stood before her and around their edges the platform narrowed into a railway. Lola looked down the tracks to the right, then the left, and saw the orange streamliner which had brought them fade into the distance.

"Well, dear, we're railroad station operators. This is it! This is our," Andrew laughed jerkily, "our summer home!" There were four houses but Andrew did not point. Theirs was obviously the hollow one. It was right in front of them, a flaked

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yellow: a "frame house," the man had said, "is provided with the position."

A glass-enclosed room jutted from the front of a house alarmingly close on the right. Inside, a woman in a peach-colored sweater and bobbed hair bent over a desk. "A Miss Price works the other shift. Want to talk to her?"

Lola was barely conscious of Andrew's words, but she knew that behind the controlled and casual rumble of his voice a middle-aged heart was leaping with the delight of something new, another experiment. She had learned long ago that summers off were the best thing about school teaching.

"Want to talk to her?" Andrew said.

She shook her head. "Not right now. Please, not right now, Andrew."

He swept his hand again and again over sparse black hair, finally destroying the wide part, and sat restlessly on one of the boxes. "I know it isn't fancy, Lola, but after you've seen a sunset," he laughed again, softly, "a sunset and of course, a pay check, dear, you won't mind the house. We've lived in places this bad before. Remember when we took that teaching job in Joseph City?"

She tried not to remember Joseph City, and at the same time she tried to smile. A smile would be appropriate, with Andrew laughing about everything, but a smile would not come. Surely he understood by now that she did not mind physical discomforts. Hard work was life. It was expected. It went with having big families.

She did mind spiritual discomforts. "Andrew, we're so far away from everything! I never dreamed we would be so far."

"Far? Twenty minutes?" Andrew's arm leveled stiff and bobbing in the direction from which they had come, the arm bands pulling at his shirt sleeves. "Twenty minutes down that track is Ogden! I tell you, Lola, the lake was practically the first thing the pioneers saw when they came into the Valley." His voice got louder; the high temper Lola blamed on eighteen years of eighth graders was in control. "I told you we could go to church! I told you we were right in the middle of Zion. What more do you want? For heaven's sake, dear, it took us almost thirty minutes to get to meeting at home by the time we got

Grandma Anderson up those confounded stairs!" Lola wished she had smiled when it would have helped. "Doesn't anybody trust me?" Andrew said as he looked about him, trying to catch the attention of the children. "This is the best summer job we have ever had, Lola, you *know* that." He stood up, as straight as a post. Lola knew he wished he were taller, or bigger through the shoulders like the early Church leaders who somehow governed their families without too much difficulty. She must have told him a hundred times, indirectly of course, that size did not matter. It was the soul of a man.

"I'm going to talk to Miss Price," he said, smoothing his sleeves. Lola watched the narrow back stiffen, then relax, as he walked away, and the hands slip nonchalantly into his pockets as he stepped, suddenly smiling again, through the door of the office.

Lola wanted nothing more than to be an understanding wife. A man was the head of the house, entitled to inspiration to guide it, and when the inspiration had obviously come— But she did not understand. Right this minute, for instance, she did not understand how he could smile at Miss Price.

"Your father is right, you know," she said aloud. But the children were not listening. They were peering over the edge of the platform into the salt water below or moving excitedly in and out of their summer home. Maybe Andrew was right. Land was not so far. You could see the Rockies in one direction, and maybe on a clear day the faint outline of buildings. She spoke loudly. "Come on, Joe. Everybody. Let's move in."

Joe began lifting boxes into the house. Barbara juggled Ted, and Harry carried loose books, violins, and swimming suits. Nanette tugged at Lola's arm. "Mother, there's a bathroom in there just like at Uncle Clifton's. Only you can see right through it. You can see the lake! Come and see. It's terrific!" Then Barbara came out and said soothingly, "It isn't such a bad house, Mother. It is kind of old, but there are lots of windows."

Wayne, who must have asked Andrew a hundred times (that had made him mad, too) if their house was really, honestly going to be right on a lake, just stood and stared, his mouth flopped full open and his eyes settled toward the west.

"Look, Mother. Look at those kids."

In front of the two smaller houses bunches of Mexican children peered from beneath uncombed bangs, their faces dirty and inquisitive. They were probably not Mormons. Lola smiled at them, then up toward the windows dried cloudy with salt spray. The plump faces of equally dark mothers pressed against the glass. Nodding recognition and waving briskly at the children, Lola took Wayne by the hand. "Come on, let's get settled so we can watch the sun go down."

As she unpacked she breathed deep the lake air and sent off a silent prayer. Even if the train would come back and take them home, back to a place where the hallowed ground of Zion was at least visible, to the violin lessons and the first beau Barbara had ever had whose father did not smoke, Lola saw in six pairs of blue eyes that nothing but a miracle could restore the stability she and Andrew had spent eighteen years cultivating.

The only thing to do was to unpack and live as near the Lord as possible, from one Sunday to the next, and try to save lots of money. On Sunday she would realize that of course they were really not very far from church and neighbors, they would be able to mingle with the saints, and everything would be fine. She could hardly wait.

By the time morning had filled and warmed the kitchen, Lola was scrubbing it. A square at a time she worked, half expecting the dark color to change. It did not, but it gave her a boost to know things were clean and that the corners had been gotten into. Clean corners made a clean room.

It gave her a boost, too, to think about last night. It had been a nice sunset. Evening and then the sun actually sliding off the edge of the water seemed to fix everything. The four houses made fairly impressive silhouettes after dark, and their lighted windows looked like squares of gold. It was even impossible to tell in the night that the Rocky Mountains could not be seen in all directions.

Best of all, Andrew had gotten tears in his eyes and just let them lie glistening in the long wrinkles of his cheeks. He always got tears in his eyes when he saw something really beautiful, or heard something very good, but last night he had put his arm around her waist, too, and held her tight at his side. Then she had nearly cried herself. She wasn't one to confuse

nature with God, but she was willing to give Him credit for sunsets if they would make a beau out of her husband.

She moved a fast, round rhythm across the floor. Andrew called her self-winding because when she really got working she started to sing. This time she slid into "She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain" with such vigor that her voice soared through the house and beyond. Suddenly a smiling Andrew stood in the doorway.

"Happy, dear?"

Lola frowned. Even if he was right, there had to remain a difference between putting up with things and singing about them. She did not answer.

"Well, there's nothing to the job," he said. "We're getting paid for doing practically nothing."

Lola looked up at her husband. "Andrew, I hope we have time to watch the sun go down again."

He laughed aloud then. "Have time? Lola, Miss Price says that's all there is to do! Except of course eat and sleep."

"There is work, too, Andrew. The house is a mess."

"Look, if I know you," Andrew said, "we're going to have the house work done by the time today is over. Besides, the place isn't worth fixing up. We're going to have so much time we won't know what to do with it." He sounded as if he knew.

"But what about the children? Children have to have jobs."

"Wayne said he's going fishing. Did you hear him say that?" Andrew laughed again. Lola could not remember when he had laughed so much. "The kids are wild about the place, aren't they?"

"Joe isn't. He read magazines during the sunset."

"Don't let that frown fool you. He loves it. He's just stubborn."

Lola wished she could just say, "Yes, Andrew," and let it go at that. "I will not have the children idle all day."

"Okay, okay. You can find something for them to do if anybody can."

"I wish we had known. We could have brought some jobs. I've got jobs—"

"Well, we didn't," Andrew interrupted. His voice had a little snap to it now, but immediately it softened. "Lola, if you

want to, we can have a meeting, a family meeting, and talk about it."

"Andrew!" Lola rose quickly to her feet, tossing her head so that the brown hair fell long as she pulled a heavy net away and stuffed it into her apron pocket. Her mind filled with pictures of all eight of them, seated and attentive, solemnly discussing idleness. Family meetings were a commandment few Latter-day Saints were able to keep.

"Andrew, that's a wonderful idea!" She wanted to throw her arms around him, kiss shut the eyes that told her he knew darn well it was a wonderful idea. She had known all along that he did not mean it when he said parliamentary procedure in the living room was nonsense.

"It ought to take a while, too," Andrew said. "Maybe we could kill an hour or two a day with meetings."

Lola wished he would not joke about spiritual things, but she could not worry about that now. "Think of the unity! Think of it, Andrew!" Lola whipped about the kitchen, humming freely now, finishing her song.

"Well, it's an idea anyway," Andrew chuckled as he left. "I'll gather up the family."

Lola sparkled inside. They were isolated, but they were together, and Andrew had been right after all. What could better tide them over from Sunday to Sunday than family meetings?

By the time all of them were on their knees for morning prayers, a sign had been posted on the wall:

FAMILY MEETING AT 7:30, OR
IMMEDIATELY AFTER SUNSET
AGENDA: LEISURE

And by meeting time that night, not only was everyone ready and waiting, but to the agenda had been added

WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH TED?

Lola was sure there was a scripture that said the power of Satan would be upon the waters, and her mind darted right to it when Harry suggested that they tie Ted to a post so he would not drown.

"No," Lola said. There was silence. "We won't have that,

will we, Andrew?"

Wayne, holding Ted as usual, leaned from behind him. "There's no saving anyone head first in salt water, Mom. You ought to go swimming and see. There'd be no saving him if he fell in."

"It's just that tying him up isn't right, that's all." She thought she said it simply enough, with conviction enough, that there could be no question.

Andrew looked thoughtfully at the floor. He always looked at the floor, or at the ceiling, when he was thinking. "He is going to tumble off the bridge one of these days if we don't do something, I'm afraid," he said, still looking up, then down.

"Why can't we just watch him? Between seven of us, we ought to be able to watch him," Lola said.

Andrew stood up. He always stood up when he had made up his mind. "Lola, family." He paused. "I think that since the back yard is a twenty-foot drop to the lake, and the front yard is a railroad track, and since Teddy doesn't know the train schedule," he stopped to laugh, "I'm afraid we are going to have to tie him to something."

"But Andrew! He is a child of God. A little human being. He isn't a dog!"

"Well, Lola, since he doesn't know that yet, and since it is just for the summer, I don't think it would hurt anybody to tie him up."

Lola looked at her oldest son. He didn't talk much, but when he did he was usually sensible.

"What do you think, Joe?"

"Faith or fences, eh," he said. Barbara giggled. She was Joe's greatest fan.

"That's right," nodded Lola. "Do we have faith or don't we?"

Joe tipped his chair back against the wall. "We could leash him."

"That's the same thing," Lola said. Andrew said it was not. "If we leash him, dear, at least we can assign shifts. It will give the family something to do." The family did not want something to do. Harry said he was not going to be any baby tender, and the girls nodded in support until Andrew reminded them

that Wayne was right; there would be no saving Ted in salt water.

Lola knew it was decided, and she did not want to doubt Andrew, but she felt she must give in reluctantly, and even while she was sure that come evening prayers she would say she was sorry, she had to comment, "Well, some Latter-day Saints might do it."

Then she assigned jobs. Barbara was the best swimmer and was therefore to retrieve whatever Ted threw overboard, especially his diapers. Nanette was to scrub a certain portion of the walls each day. Joe had said that whoever built the massive bridge without stringing one little electric light wire to Midlake was a stupid fool, so he was given charge of the lanterns. Wayne would empty the pan under the ice box, even though there were two cracks in the floor beside it, and Harry would shake the rugs and wind the clocks. Everybody would take a shift at Ted's leash, and would try, insofar as possible, to keep busy.

Not only was it one of the longest family meetings they had ever had, but nobody left. Andrew was jubilant.

"We got a lot done, didn't we?" Andrew said as he climbed into bed. "I wonder if Miss Price heard us singing. I wonder what she thought if she did."

"Harry said she has ash trays all over her house, and a parakeet." Lola had heard about women who would rather have parakeets than children.

"Maybe we can invite her over next time," Andrew said. "It wouldn't be so bad being away from everything if we could convert somebody."

"We mustn't forget though that there is no substitute for being with the saints. Even family meetings don't make up for good neighbors and going to church."

Andrew's voice came right back, annoyed and tired. "I wonder if you will live until Sunday, for heaven's sake."

"Thank goodness it's almost here," Lola mumbled. It seemed an eternity. Three days. Three days of idleness, scrubbing walls that had already been scrubbed while wool batts and quilt tops waited at home to be stitched—an eternity until they could worship with the saints, and meanwhile Ted leashed all

the time. Somehow it seemed dishonest to be so anxious for the Lord's day if you sinned in the week.

"Lola, did you notice nobody left family meeting? Not even Joe?"

Lola nodded. Of course she had noticed. There was no place to go. But it had been impressive just the same.

"If we keep having problems, we will probably get into the habit of meetings by the time we go home," Andrew said.

Lola nodded again. She closed her eyes and went to sleep hoping there would be problems.

Thursday morning Nanette got splinters during family prayer and asked if it would be all right to make kneeling pads for everybody. Lola went to the kitchen wall and posted an agenda:

ARE KNEELING PADS RITUAL?

And when Nanette came back later and said that Tony Martinez had told Barbara she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen, Lola wrote below it:

TONY

"Barbara said she likes him, too," Nanette added, and Lola added:

NON-MORMON INFLUENCES IN GENERAL

Friday it was Wayne. "Mom, Mrs. Martinez won't let us use any more clear water. She said we can only rinse off the salt once a day." Lola went to the agenda wall:

CLEAR WATER AND MRS. MARTINEZ

Saturday Wayne said, "Mother, when is it Sunday? Can we go home on Sunday?" And Lola decided it would be good to have a meeting about Sunday. She did not want to seem ungrateful. She was thankful for the compensations, that they had had four family meetings, time to read *The Improvement Era* from cover to cover, and even time for sunsets. But there was no substitute for a real, live Sabbath.

Sunday morning everybody except Andrew, who had to work and refused even to discuss it because it would not do any good, got ready for Sunday School. It was Joe's day to take a bath, and he was the last one ready. While he labored with wavy hair that would not lie flat, Lola went into the small office where Andrew was typing train messages and told him

not to forget to stop the 9:20 so they could go into Ogden to church.

Andrew looked at the train schedule for a long time, then stood up and moved about the office, apparently in deep thought. Finally he looked toward Lola, but his glance spun by her.

"Dear, I've been thinking. All morning I've been thinking."

Lola adjusted her hat and balanced the hat pin in her teeth. "Is my hat even, Andrew?"

He looked at her a full second this time, then away. "Dear, do you think it is wise?"

"What?"

"Well, stopping the 9:20."

Lola stared. How else were they to get to church?

"I said, do you think that is wise, Lola? I mean, our first week, dear. I didn't realize it, but that's a ninety-car train. You don't just flag a ninety-car train twenty minutes from its destination and say you want to go to Sunday School, do you?"

Lola thought you did. She thought you did anything for the true Church, and she stood silent and unbelieving. By now all six children, Wayne pulling Ted, had crowded into the small office and surrounded her. They looked smileless at their father. Lola did not want to argue in front of them, but if Andrew would not seek first the Kingdom, she would have to.

"Andrew! It is Sunday morning!"

Andrew sat down. His expression was kind but firm, and he said, "Look, family, I'm sorry. I'm very sorry, but I guess we won't be able to go to church today." He paused. Lola did not say anything. She just stood there and looked at him. It was the first time he had sat down when his mind was made up. "Maybe sometime during the summer we can get Miss Price to work Sunday morning," he said, "and then I'll stop the train and explain to the conductor, and we will all go to Sunday School. Okay?"

"Okay," Wayne said, and Barbara nodded. Joe walked out.

"That's all right," said Wayne, patting his father on the knee, and Nanette said, "Don't worry, Daddy, it's all right." One by one they disappeared in the direction of the house.

Andrew looked up at Lola and tried to say with his eyes that inspiration had come. "Dear, this is one of the sacrifices. We decided there would be sacrifices. Remember?" Lola looked toward the door and the disappearing children, her starched and curled thoroughbreds. "They'll get over it," Andrew said.

Lola backed toward the door. "Heaven help us if they do," she said weakly, prayerfully. Before she was back into the house the tears came, and the more the children said, "It's all right, Mother, we don't care," the harder she cried.

She tried to remember that it was the Sabbath. She gathered the children about her in the biggest of the two medium large rooms and led them in all four verses of "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet." Nanette prayed and they read the story of Alma's conversion from *The Book of Mormon*. Then they sang the first verse of "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" again because that was the only church song Wayne knew. Eating took a certain amount of time, and Lola began to wonder what they would do when Fast Sunday came. Maybe that would be the best day to stop the streamliner.

"I can't think of any more spiritual things to do," she told Andrew when he got off work. He could. He told faith-promoting stories about everything from healings to Aunt Rachel's finally getting a husband. Then he read from a book of pioneer stories he had brought, "with great foresight," Lola interrupted, and ended up by telling all of the good things he could remember about his missionary experiences in New Mexico.

The sunset was the nicest yet, and Lola felt sure as she got into bed that if the Sabbath could be kept holy without any of it being spent in church, they had done it. She did not know when she had been more thankful to have a day end, though, and she told the Lord so unashamedly.

"Andrew," she said as she turned off the lantern. "Andrew, even if it was all right to miss church, the bishop would die. Bishop Perkins wouldn't understand at all if he knew that not one of us—"

"Listen, Lola, I knew Bishop Perkins when he didn't know who went to church because he wasn't there. I remember when he—"

"Andrew!"

"I'm sorry, dear."

Long after Lola thought Andrew had gone to sleep and left her to worry alone, he said, "Lola, can't you see his cheeks, red like they get?"

"Whose?"

"Bishop Perkins'," Andrew laughed softly. "Lola, I think I'll go see him when we get back and tell him we haven't been to church once all summer. Just to see how he looks. You know."

Lola didn't answer. There are times when a wife should not. But she buried her face in the pillow and tried to remember whether the sunset hanging on the wall at home was yellow or pink or both. She pretended that if she lit the lantern, she could look and see.