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This is a work of fiction. The historical events, names, character, and places are real but used fictitiously. The incidents of the characters are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Dear God, They're Pressing On

This story is a fictional account of possible angelic-and-family interactions.
("Every day may not be good, but there's something good in every day.")
It is a "Dear God letter" regarding the summer of 1915 at the Schwartz homestead.

Dear God, this is a letter from your favorite angel, Frivol (German for “frivolous”). I am writing because I know you are busy with the “Great War” occurring in Europe, so read this when you have the time.

I am complaining about the homestead’s newest guardian angel, Zäh (German for “tough”). She is a harsh one in thought. Her former ward was in New England, a man who died as supervisor of a factory that used child labor. She is a proponent of working from dawn to dusk—and working hard! Certainly, children’s guardian angels at the factory tried to moderate Zäh. I am also trying to soften her, as I clash with her view of discipline.

To refresh Your memory,
we 16 guardian angels are in
Moravia, Texas, at the
Joseph and Sophie Schwartz home.
The farm is on several acres of partially cleared land.

The home has recently been upgraded
with a large parlor downstairs and
more sleeping space upstairs.

The 14 children range in age from 22 years
to nine months. With 16 guardian angels
protecting the family, You would think
that the harsh philosophy of Zäh would not
have much bearing.

But, Zäh says, “The daily grind of hard work makes
the children polished.” Oh, I realize that work is
important. But You know me—I am a clumsy angel.
If I stumble, I make it part of my song and dance.

Ha! I want children to be happy all of the time.
I want the children to continue
to sing, dance, and play.
Is that too much to ask,
dear God?

Your flock that we angels tend includes:

Sophie (age 22) is exquisite like a wild rose. Her eyes are as bright as fireflies. She is so happy that she bubbles over with enthusiasm.

Ernest (age 18) can chop wood faster than a fly finds decay. He is as strong as an ox. He almost dislocates his shoulders describing a fish in the creek that he once hooked.

Ottile (age 17) is forgiving like a rainbow and as innocent as a lamb. She can be found cooing and rocking Willie Mae, the wakeful baby.

Joe (age 16) is as cool as a cucumber and humble like a peacemaker. He looks for desserts as if they were buried treasure.

Otto (age 14) is tougher than nails and as modest as an apology. When two young ones get upset at the same time, he says, "Get a mop. We're fixin' to see a bucket of tears!"

Martha (age 13) lights-up the room when she arrives. She's as reliable as heat from fire and is devoted like a parent.

Bill (age 12) loves to tell jokes. He is respected like a handwritten letter and is as responsible as the sun securing harvest.

Albina (age 11) is sweet like sugar and as generous as a heavy cloud. She has been known to say to Willie Mae, "Put your tears on simmer!"

Louise (age 10) is brilliant like the sun and as direct as light. Her dreams are so big that she will have to grow into them.

Alfons (age 9) is brave like a lion and as selfless as the Bible. You can find him looking upward, where there are no architectural rules for cloud-castles.

John (age 7) is curious like a cat and as focused as an eagle. He asks questions that even wise ones cannot answer.

Annie (age 6) is honest like a mirror and as candid as an open book. One morning Papa asked her if she'd said her prayers the previous night. Annie said that she had. He then asked if she'd said her prayers that morning. She replied, "Nope, I'm not scared of the daylight." Her retort pasted a smile on Papa's face.

Hilda (age 3) is quick like a bunny and as enthusiastic as a kitten. She talks faster than anyone can listen.

Willie Mae (age 9 months) is as friendly as winter sunshine and has cheeks like red roses. Making her laugh is easier than breaking a biscuit.

Mutter (German for "Mother") is age 44. She's as kind as heaven and warm like a newborn puppy. She's the reason Papa wears a smile most of the time.

Papa (age 46) is as bold as St. Peter and trustworthy like a well-kept secret. Time of day can be told by the length of his whiskers.

Following are examples of some angelic-and-family exchanges.

One wash day in the summer of 1915, Martha, Albina, and Louise were hanging laundry on the clothesline. They were also airing out the family's bedding used the previous night. Nearby, the flowers fluttered and danced in the morning breeze.

The girls were singing, "Spinn, Spinn, Meine Liebe Tochter" (German for "Spinning, Spinning, My Dear Daughter"), an old German folksong.

It was midmorning, and they'd already milked the cows, separated the cream, made the bread, and washed Willie Mae's diapers. Hanging them in the pleasant draft was easy. But just as Mutter came up the trail from working in the garden, a nearly dry diaper left the line and blew straight onto Mutter's face.

"Who hung this diaper so shabbily?" Mutter asked.

"Jemand" (German for "somebody"), they exclaimed in unison. Mutter removed the diaper from her smiling face, handed it to Martha, and said, "Die Fratzen!" (This was her way of saying "You rascals!")

Zäh said, "There is no cure for stupidity, it seems."
I said, "A mistake should be your teacher, not your attacker."
I think Zäh wanted Mutter to punish someone, Lord.
I don't agree with that, do You?

On another day that summer, activities were lively as everyone had jobs to do. The young ones, John and Annie, had already gathered and cleaned the eggs without breakage. They were done churning the butter and were about to refill the kitchen stove's wood box.

The middle boys, Bill and Alfons, finished slaughtering two chickens for the coming noon meal and were practicing jokes to repeat at dinner.

The middle girls—Martha, Albina, and Louise—were watering the livestock, pulling weeds, and sweeping the porches.

Otto had mucked out the barn and groomed the horses and mule early on. Papa was going into town with Ernest and Joe to pick up the new pump organ for the fresh parlor. Meanwhile, Otto chopped wood for molasses making.

Mutter was watering the garden, pulling weeds, and picking vegetables for supper.

The oldest girls, Sophie and Otilie, were busy in the kitchen multi-tasking. The big dinner at noon was soon approaching, and many things still needed to be done.

At the same time, they were watching Hilda and Willie Mae—the little ones playing with pots and pans near the pantry. The older girls had, in their minds, the slogan “They’ll come hungry, but leave full” as they clattered their way through making the meal and kolaches. Food was their priority.

Meanwhile, John brought in the firewood, though accidentally dropping a log on the floor. Mutter was about to enter the kitchen with a basket of garden vegetables when a mishap occurred.

You see, when Annie brought in the bucket of wash water from the porch spigot, she stumbled on the log, spilling a lot of water. Hilda and Willie Mae made a beeline toward the puddle just as Mutter walked in. Sophie and Otilie scrambled.

John and Annie quickly moved to the slop window with guilty faces.

“Ach mein Gott!” (German for “Oh, my God!”)
Mutter exclaimed as she saw the disaster.

Zäh said, “Somebody should be punished.
Everyone wants happiness. No one wants pain.
But you can’t have a rainbow without a little rain.”

I responded with,
“But dreams come true when you handle the mistakes with joy.”
Was Annie’s bucket half empty or half full, Lord? Who was right, dear God? Some say the pessimist may be right in the long run, but doesn’t the optimist have a better time during the trip?

“Who did this?” Mutter asked.
“Jemand,” everyone replied.
Once again Mutter said, “Die Fratzen!”

Mutter could find the humor in almost all situations now,
But 20 years prior, she was drowning in a sea of grief at the death
of two of her babies in 1894 and 1895. You can tell she
has 16 children by the delicate wrinkles on her face.

I think sometimes children do need to be punished, but thankfully,
this wasn't one of the times. Instead, everyone did their part to
clean up the mess and finish making dinner.

With the floor dry, John and Annie set the table. The meal was about to begin when Papa, Ernest, and Joe arrived with the organ. The unloading would have to wait until their bellies were filled.

During the meal, a flood of questions about the modern pump organ drenched the conversation. However, there was a drought of answers, as Papa said, "Time will tell who should play the organ."

Then Bill and Alfons repeated their rehearsed jokes.

Bill: "What did the mutter cow say to her calf?"

Alfons: "It's pasture bedtime."

Bill: "Why does Hilda's summer cold run out of her nose?"

Alfons: "Because it can't walk!"

They laughed, ate and felt satisfied. Before leaving the table to unload the organ from the wagon, Papa heard the last kolache calling his name. He took it and the ground poppy seeds left a pleasant taste in his mouth.

As the kitchen was cleaned, the organ became a part of the parlor. Papa said, "None of us is as useful as all of us! All must do their part."

Eventually the kitchen heaved a sigh as some youngsters were destined to take a nap. And, that dear God, reminds me of another incident of conflict—between Zäh and me.

It happened on another summer day in 1915, Mutter had been in the garden gathering seed for next year's crop. Papa was fixing two deep ruts in the family's road. Both parents had handed out chores for 12 children to accomplish before noon. (The two youngest didn't have chores yet.)

Sophie and Otilie were in charge of Hilda and Willie Mae in Mutter's room. The older girls were dividing their time between the small ones, cutting-out and sewing boys' shirts, and somehow also fixing the big meal. Hilda and Willie Mae were playing with spools and other sewing notions.

Ernest, Joe, and Otto were given the chores of greasing the wagon axles and fixing the fence in the morning; by afternoon, they'd be operating the molasses press with Papa.

Martha, Albina, and Louise were washing linens and ironing shirts that morning. John and Annie were picking peaches and trying not to bruise them.

Bill and Alfons were to oil both the windmill and the molasses press. Then they were to oil the harnesses and saddles so the leather wouldn't crack.

Everyone did their chores thoroughly, except **this** morning Bill and Alfons did not. They neglected to put oil in the molasses press because they chose to read jokes in the castor bean patch instead. That was a poor decision, as might be imagined.

But noon dinner was eventually served, and Alfons and Bill recited typical riddles they'd read from well-worn books.

Alfons: "What can Hilda give and keep at the same time?"

Bill: "Her summer cold."

Alfons: "What is bigger but lighter than this house?"

Bill: "Its shadow."

After the meal, naps on the feather bed came easy for the little ones, as the other 12 children resumed unfinished chores. Alfons and Bill forgot about the press.

After dinner the three oldest sons went to the molasses press. The molasses sold for 25 cents per gallon. Its sale gave Papa extra money to buy additional land.

Joe would be leading the mule in circles around the mill. Otto would be feeding the stalks into the centralized mill, while the juice squeezed out and into a reservoir. Ernest had the hardest job. Being the oldest, he was to bring one neighbor's entire pile of cane to Otto. It was all heavy and messy work.

Papa, in the meantime, was in the cool of the boiling shack, cleaning the evaporating pan and readying it for the sap from the mill's reservoir. Soon Bill and Alfons would be building and tending the fire under the pan to evaporate the sap's water. The result is a kind of syrup that most call "molasses."

The workforce was hours into sap extraction when suddenly Old Pete, the mule, balked about going around in circles. Upon seeing the angry mule, Bill and Alfons suddenly remembered the oil by the shed—the oil they were supposed to have put in the mill. Without the lubricant, the mill had seized up, and Old Pete could not turn the rollers.

Papa went to Joe and asked, “What’s the matter?” Papa frowned when he heard the answer. Papa then saw the isolated jar half-full of oil and knew that today’s dinner riddles had come at a price.

Bill and Alfons prepared for the worst. They had chosen poorly.

Papa didn’t need to yell. He was able to raise his eyebrows instead of his voice. You can be sure that Bill and Alfons rushed to pour the oil in the mill because Papa’s body had spoken. Old Pete was then able to continue walking in circles to turn the lubricated mill.

I said, "Better late than never."

Zäh said, "Never late is better."

Then she added, "Families must work hard to succeed."

To which I retorted, "But, families are like fudge—always sweet and sometimes nutty."

Bill and Alfons were forgiven when they apologized to Papa.

They resumed making syrup that afternoon and finished a neighbor's entire bundle. Bunches and bunches of other bundles still needed to be milled. Everyone in the family felt overwhelmed at molasses-making time. Papa always said, "We may not be finished yet, but we're closer than we were yesterday."

That evening, the family sat outside by the kitchen, playing games in the sand and singing songs from church. Mutter's voice channeled the melodies of heaven. Otto played the accordion.

Papa punished the two boys by making them sweep the entire house that evening. Also, he made them gather water for the next day's diaper wash. I doubt that they'll make the same mistake again. Poor Bill and Alfons!

Baby Willie Mae was given a sponge bath that cheered up her skin. The cows were milked for the second time that day, and the house began to get quiet. Everyone settled down for a flawless night's sleep on the two porches. All 16 of the guardian angels rested as well, grateful that no one had been bitten by a snake or injured in any way. The angels hoped each Schwartz knew that they were beautiful inside—and loved deeply. And the moon played hide-and-seek with the soft clouds.

The next morning began overcast. Morning chores had been done. Dinner had been served, and it was questionable as to whether You, God, were going to send some daytime rain.

Lord, You made rainy days so that farmers could get their housework done. But with mountains of cane to process into molasses for the neighbors, Papa certainly wanted to proceed in channeling his restlessness at the mill. But it was sprinkling, so Papa settled down to look at records of school board meetings. You know, Papa advocates for the Moravia public school children.

Across the hall, Mutter and the babies were taking a nap after a morning of making peach preserves. Otilie was cleaning the stove, and Sophie was in the pantry, rotating the fresh supplies (purchased that morning) behind the older foods, which would be eaten first. Otto, Joe, and Ernest were gathering wood for the evaporation pan's fire. Everyone else was shelling peanuts harvested last fall.

It was hot and humid when rest time ended. The garden was begging for water. But then the sun peaked out, and Papa made the executive decision to make a batch of molasses. He took a gamble that it wasn't going to rain. So, almost everyone except the babies helped with the mill and evaporation pan. During the slow times, some were sent to the cotton fields to chop weeds before eventual rain would muddy the ground.

Even though the houseflies had gathered on the house windows, and the crickets had quit chirping to signal impending rain, the molasses operation began. Sap came out smoothly. The guardian angels had only to worry about pinched fingers and a head being hit by the sweep pole.

But when the evaporation pan was hot and full of boiling sap, the angels had to work double time.

I spoke aloud to the other angels, "I'm worried about all the possible accidents that could occur with the molasses cooking."

Another angel said, "Think positive!"

Zäh replied, "It's rude to interrupt my anxiety with your confident thought."

Eventually, milling was completed, and just the task of evaporation remained. An older brother skimmed foam from the top of the evaporating pan.

Then a bolt of lightning and boom of thunder caused little sister to throw cooled scum on her older sister. The affected girl screamed with surprise, though the scum did not burn her. She then kicked the large bucket of future pig-food-scum, stubbing her toe. This left every person and angel nervous about what could happen next. The weather was making the situation riskier.

Zäh said, “Taking risks is like putting a ladder **against** the sky. It falls and fails. Papa should not have chosen to make molasses today.”

I countered her, saying, “Taking an educated risk is like putting a ladder **straight up** into the sky. If the risk on one side of the ladder is balanced by God’s divine providence on the other side, the ladder will not fall. The task could be successful. But we must balance our decisions with faith in God!”

After the scum incident the family tried to remain calm and the process proceeded. The boys had to keep the fire hot enough to reduce the sap to syrup, but not so hot that the sugars would burn. They steadily watched both the fire and the sky. Would they be able to finish this batch before the afternoon succumbed to a storm? Individually, everyone prayed.

Finally with the last of the molasses put into jugs for the neighbors, they'd made their quota for the day. The family then entered the house while lightning danced across the sky. Leaves waved violently in the wind. Darkness wrapped its arms around the house and the wind howled into the late evening.

Inside, they lit three lanterns so that light could conquer the darkness and fear. Papa said, "Fear is a liar. Do not let it get ahold of you."

So everyone huddled together in Mutter's room. Sixteen people and their 16 guardian angels prayed that hail and wind would not destroy their crops or home. Only raindrops drummed hard on the metal roof, no hail.

The storm lasted for an hour and then showed mercy. The clouds were no more, and the stars could be seen twinkling near the moon.

Zäh whispered, “I feel betrayed when God sends a terrible storm like that. My girl, Willie Mae, was so frightened.”

I said, “I never question His loyalty toward us. Our people learn from adversity.”

When bedtime came, hours after the storm, a tree branch fell with a loud boom near the smokehouse. Mutter and Papa said, “Not to worry. We can fix the smokehouse. You kinder (German for “children”) are all safe. That’s what is important.”

Then the stairs sighed as the kinder went
up to their beds for sweet dreams.

Dear God,

We have learned a lot during the summer of 1915.
So, we began the “Schwartz Club of Angels.”

The club’s first rule is from the Bible, Hebrews 12:11, “For the moment all discipline seems painful, rather than pleasant. But it later yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

This is Zäh’s favorite rule.

The club’s second rule is “Lousy relationships (such as mine and Zäh’s) occur. We work at those interactions to learn life lessons.”

The club’s third rule is “Tough love secures family survival **only** when it is seasoned with soft love.”

Sincerely,
Your favorite angel, Frivol

About Pam Backlund

Both my sister, Coleen Berger Schneider (text editor) and I are the granddaughters of Annie, the 12th of 14 living children of Joseph and Sophie Schwartz.

Jean Ann LeGrand inspired me to write a story about the early life of this immigrant couple...our great-grandparents. So I did. Writing stories has been my hobby since my retirement from teaching high school science.

Every story needs some conflict, so I arbitrarily chose Bill and Alfons to make a hefty mistake. They, by no means, actually forgot to put oil in the molasses press, but having them do so, made the story more plausible.

Also, Bill went by "Willie" in 1915...later going by "Bill" when he moved from Moravia, Texas to San Angelo, Texas. Since his sister's name is "Willie Mae," I chose to call him "Bill" in my children's book to stifle confusion.

I researched children's chores in 1915. I also researched the house and property with the help of my dad, Eugene Berger.

My son, Alan Backlund, took data from various sources (including information given by my son, Thomas Backlund by way of the camera in his drone) and rendered the aerial version of the homestead for page 7.

I contacted a phenomenal illustrator, AJ Wanegar to co-author the book. Her representations of my text are clear, imaginative, and colorful. I am deeply indebted to her for every "better half" of each page.



Cir. 1914: The Joseph Schwartz family taken at home by Louis Vrana. Back Row L-R: Willie, Joe, Sophie, Ernest, Otilie, Otto, Martha. Front row: Alfons, Joseph (father), Annie, Louise, Hildegard, Sophie (mother), John and Albina. Willie Mae was just a baby, asleep on Papa's bed in the house. Most photographs were taken outside. Backdrops were used such as the hanging quilts, tapestry or even animal hides.