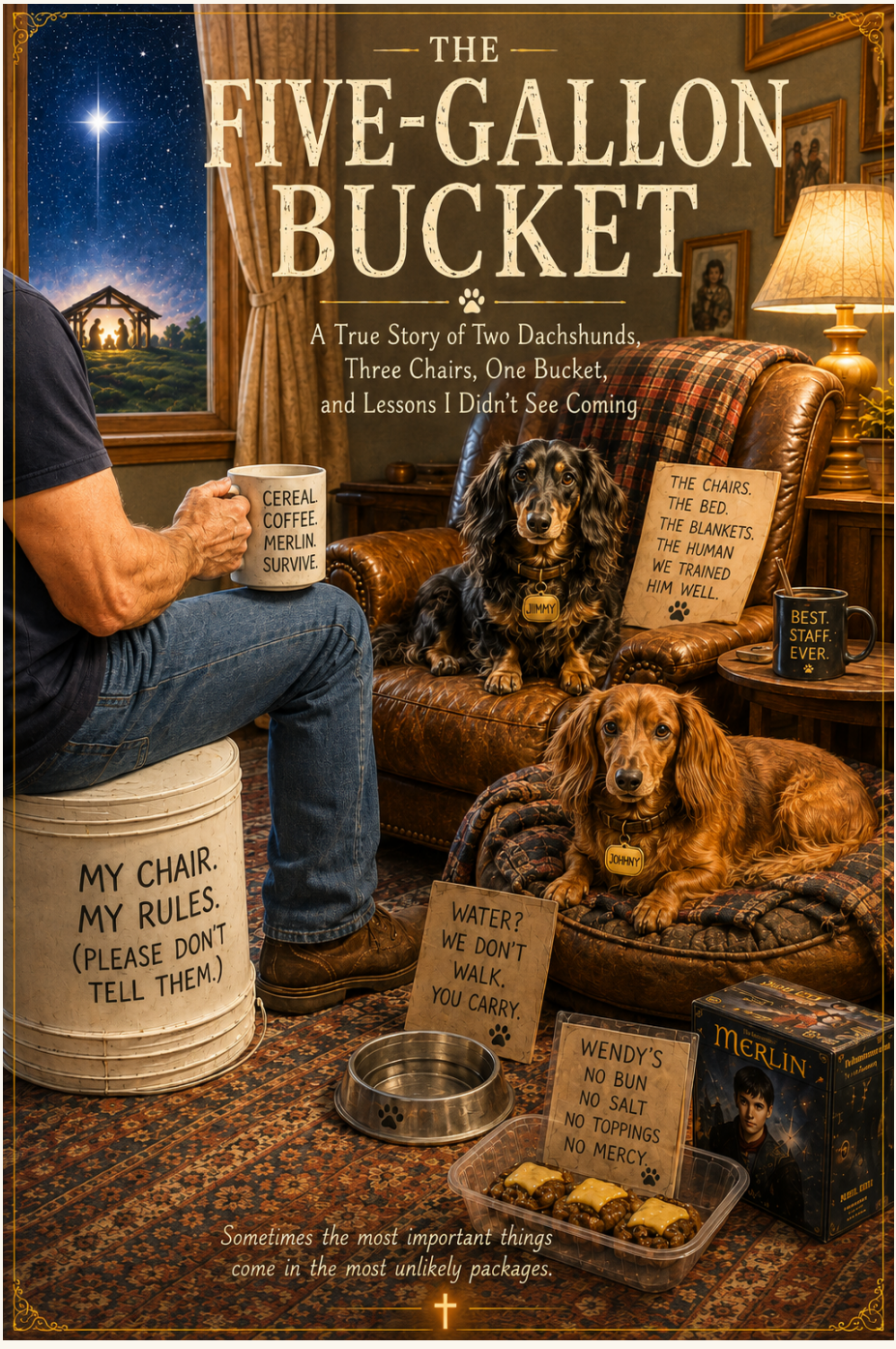

THE
FIVE-GALLON
BUCKET
A True Story of Two Dachshunds,
Three Chairs, One Bucket,
and Lessons I Didn't See Coming
CEREAL.
COFFEE.
MERLIN.
SURVIVE.
JIMMY
THE CHAIRS.
THE BED.
THE BLANKETS.
THE HUMAN
WE TRAINED
HIM WELL.
BEST.
STAFF.
EVER.
JOHNNY
MY CHAIR.
MY RULES.
(PLEASE DON'T
TELL THEM.)
WATER?
WE DON'T
WALK.
YOU CARRY.
WENDY'S
NO BUN
NO SALT
NO TOPPINGS
NO MERCY.
MERLIN
Sometimes the most important things
come in the most unlikely packages.

It was somewhere around five in the morning.

I couldn't sleep.

The humidity outside was terribly high, my whole body was aching, and I was uncomfortable enough that sleep didn't seem particularly interested in me.

So I asked ChatGPT a perfectly reasonable question:

> **Me: “If having trouble sleeping should you use a pillow or not? Also if you are paradoxical with most meds, should you drink caffeine to fall asleep?”**

ChatGPT gave me the sensible answer.

Use whatever pillow keeps your head and neck comfortable.

And don't use caffeine as a sleep aid.

Apparently caffeine blocks adenosine, one of the brain's main sleep-pressure signals.

Fine.

There was just one problem with this perfectly reasonable medical advice.

It didn't account for me.

> **Me: “Most nights I can't sleep without caffeine.”**

That changed things.

ChatGPT acknowledged that if I'd repeatedly observed caffeine helping me fall asleep, rather than simply deciding to experiment with it at five in the morning, my experience shouldn't be dismissed.

Some people do report feeling calmer after caffeine. There could be tolerance involved. There could be an unusual individual response.

But caffeine could still interfere with sleep quality even if it helped me settle down.



All very reasonable.

Then I remembered something.

> **Me: “Also a bowl of high-fiber cereal.”**

ChatGPT incorporated this new information.

A modest bowl of cereal might actually make sense. Hunger can interfere with sleep. Carbohydrates might contribute to sleepiness. A familiar routine can become a cue that bedtime has arrived.

Then I clarified.

> **Me: “A huge bowl of high-fiber cereal and a large iced coffee from McDonald's.”**

That was apparently not what ChatGPT had pictured.

It responded:



When I had said “caffeine and a bowl of high-fiber cereal,” it had been imagining something considerably more restrained.

Apparently a huge bowl of high-fiber cereal and a large McDonald's iced coffee was not exactly what a sleep specialist would put on the front of the brochure.

Still, this was my routine.

And I hadn't finished describing it.

> **Me: “Also TV show Merlin.”**

That did it.

ChatGPT announced that we had finally identified the complete sleep protocol:

Huge bowl of high-fiber cereal.
Large McDonald's iced coffee.
Merlin.

At this point, it suspected Merlin might actually be doing more of the heavy lifting than the coffee.

It also observed that I'd somehow constructed almost the exact opposite of conventional sleep-hygiene advice:

Large meal ✔
Caffeine ✔
Television ✔
Immediately before sleep ✔

And apparently my brain responded:

Excellent. Good night.

Then I revealed one final variable.

> **Me: “Plus two dachshunds stealing my blankets and hogging the bed.”**



Now the analysis changed again.

Maybe the dogs were contributing to my aching.

If I spent the night unconsciously contorting myself around two little sausage-shaped dictators instead of rolling over naturally, perhaps sore hips, thighs, back and shoulders weren't particularly mysterious.

But sometimes it gets worse.

> **Me: “Sometimes I end up on the floor and then they hop down with me after they've conquered the bed. What's up with that? 🤔 ”**

ChatGPT immediately found something touching in this.

Maybe the bed had never been the objective.

Maybe I was.

The dachshunds wanted warmth, security, familiar scent and proximity to their person.

They push against me.
I accommodate them.
They stretch farther.
I retreat another six inches.

Eventually the superior military force controls the mattress.

I surrender completely and move to the floor.

The dachshunds survey their newly conquered territory.

Wait. Where'd he go?

Hop.

Hop.

Now everybody is sleeping on the floor.

ChatGPT thought this was rather sweet.

The comfortable bed without me was apparently less valuable than the lousy floor with me.

But it did allow for another possibility.

Maybe they simply enjoyed knowing they could make a grown man abandon his own bed.

ChatGPT assigned that possibility about 30 percent probability.

I knew better.

> **Me: “Probably 70%.”**

ChatGPT immediately conceded.



“70% sounds much more consistent with dachshund behavioral science.”

It reconstructed the military operation:



Phase 1: Occupy blankets.
Phase 2: Expand laterally despite being approximately six inches wide.
Phase 3: Force human from bed.
Phase 4: Observe successful territorial acquisition.
Phase 5: Abandon acquired territory and follow human to floor.

Its conclusion:

The bed was never the territory. I was.

But apparently they still needed to establish who was in charge first.

And apparently it wasn't me.

Then I supplied additional evidence.

> **Me: “They kick me off the big chair in the living room too and my desk chair, despite each having their own comfy La-Z-Boy. Sometimes I sit on an upside-down five-gallon bucket.”**

This changed the case considerably.

ChatGPT responded:

“Okay, the upside-down five-gallon bucket changes my assessment. 😆”

I had furnished the house with individual La-Z-Boys for the dachshunds.

Yet somehow I was the one sitting on industrial plastic.

There was clearly a pattern.

The dogs didn't necessarily want a comfortable chair.

They wanted the chair I had identified as valuable by attempting to sit in it.

If occupying my chair reliably caused me to relocate, they had learned an extraordinarily effective system.

ChatGPT proposed a breakdown:

20% affection and wanting to be near me.
10% warmth and scent.
70%:

“Make him sit on the bucket again.”

Then it imagined the dogs reclining in their La-Z-Boys watching me sit on a five-gallon bucket and thinking:

“We have trained him exceptionally well.”

I laughed.

ChatGPT then predicted an even more advanced maneuver.

I would notice an empty chair.

Begin walking toward it.

One dachshund, perfectly comfortable somewhere else, would see me moving and suddenly think:

“Oh! Apparently THAT'S the good chair.”

And get there before me.

> **Me: “Yep.”**

ChatGPT concluded that I had negotiated the worst labor contract in the history of human-canine relations.

Then I clarified something else.

There weren't merely two dog chairs.

> **Me: “Well, I have a comfy desk chair, but they have to have all three even though there are two of them.”**



Of course.

ChatGPT explained that I was applying human mathematics to dachshund property law.

Two dachshunds plus three comfortable chairs did not mean each dog got a chair with one remaining for me.

It meant each dachshund had three chairs, because dachshund ownership was apparently non-exclusive and overlapping.

The household inventory was now:

Dog 1: three chairs + bed + blankets.
Dog 2: three chairs + bed + blankets.

Me: five-gallon bucket.

Still, I had one victory.

> **Me: “They don't want the bucket, so it's a small victory for me.”**

At last.

My sovereign territory.

They had the bed.
They had the blankets.
They had all three chairs.

But the upside-down five-gallon bucket?

Mine.

ChatGPT advised me to protect it carefully.

“The moment you put a cushion on it, you're finished.”

But something genuinely bothered me.

> **Me: “Why would they want me uncomfortable?”**

ChatGPT became serious.

They almost certainly don't.

Dogs aren't thinking:

If I take his chair, he'll be uncomfortable and I will enjoy that.

They understand much simpler associations.

This chair is warm.
It smells like him.
I like being here.

When I sit here, he lets me stay.

And the strongest evidence against dachshund sadism seemed to be the fact that they eventually abandoned the comfortable bed and followed me onto the floor.

There was one problem.

> **Me: “They don't jump on the floor till I've fallen asleep.”**

Oh.

That required another revision.

So they remained comfortably on the mattress while I lay on the floor.

Only after I had actually fallen asleep did they come down.

ChatGPT reconstructed the likely dachshund thought process:

“Excellent. We have the bed.”

Human moves to floor.

“Excellent. More bed.”

Human falls asleep.



“...Wait. He's staying down there?”

Thump.

Thump.

“Fine. We'll sleep down here too.”

That still sounded rather loving.

So I introduced further evidence.

> **Me: “But then they start kicking me on the floor and take my blanket or put their butt in my face and pass gas.”**

At this point ChatGPT announced:

“Okay, the defense rests. 😂”

It had been prepared to testify that this was all attachment behavior.

Then I introduced floor kicking, blanket theft, butt placement and chemical warfare into evidence.

Still, dogs sleep pressed against people they trust. They stretch. They reposition. They burrow into blankets.

And they possess absolutely no concept that their rear end has been positioned six inches from a human respiratory system.

The gas probably wasn't an intentional tactical weapon.

Probably.

Then I revealed something important.

This wasn't my first experience with dachshunds.

Not remotely.

This is my third generation of two dachshunds.

Six dachshunds.

Three successive pairs.

Decades of evidence.

At this point I could no longer plead ignorance.

> **Me: “I must be mental.”**

ChatGPT disagreed.

This was no longer a case of:

I didn't know what I was getting into.

I had conducted a multi-decade longitudinal study.

Generation One:

What an adorable little dog.

Generation Two:

Apparently I want to do this again.

Generation Three:

Where's my bucket?

Maybe I wasn't crazy.



Maybe I'd simply concluded repeatedly that life with dachshunds was better than life without dachshunds, even though the terms and conditions were outrageous.

Then I wondered why I was attracted to such stubborn creatures.

Each generation seemed more stubborn than the last.

> **Me: “I want to be the stubborn one, but I'm the loser.”**

ChatGPT proposed that maybe what attracted me wasn't stubbornness exactly.

Maybe it was spirit.

There's something appealing about a tiny creature weighing a fraction of what you do possessing the absolute conviction that negotiations will

proceed entirely on its terms.

Dachshunds were bred to go underground after badgers and make decisions independently of the human standing above them.

A certain amount of:

“Thanks for your suggestion; I've decided otherwise.”

comes with the equipment.

But ChatGPT identified my tactical disadvantage.

I could pick up a fifteen-pound dog and reclaim my chair in approximately four seconds.

Instead, I look at the comfortable little creature and think:

Well... he's settled.

And go find the bucket.

Then came perhaps the most accurate analysis of the entire night:

They are stubborn about getting what they want.

I am stubborn about letting them be happy.

Unfortunately, in chair negotiations, those two forms of stubbornness produce exactly one outcome:

Dachshund: 1

> **Me: bucket.**

Then we got to food.

> **Me: “They are stubborn about eating. Wendy's cheeseburgers and I eat cereal.”**

ChatGPT began to suspect that I had accidentally established a tiny aristocracy.

The dogs ate Wendy's cheeseburgers while I ate cereal.

They occupied the La-Z-Boys while I sat on a bucket.

They took the bed while I slept on the floor.

This wasn't a pet hierarchy.

It was feudalism.

Then I clarified the cheeseburgers.

These weren't scraps.

Their Wendy's order was customized.

Cheeseburger.
No bun.
No toppings.
No salt.
No pepper.
Served in a clamshell.

Sometimes I get the bun and toppings.

This substantially weakened my case.

ChatGPT observed:

I wasn't tossing them scraps from a Wendy's cheeseburger.

I was placing custom restaurant orders for two dachshund entrées.

And meanwhile I got whatever bread and condiments remained from the transaction.

Then came another diagnosis:

“You aren't raising dachshunds. You're running a bed-and-breakfast with room service.”

And finally ChatGPT believed it understood why each generation became more stubborn.

I was creating dachshund royalty.

Every generation arrived, examined the historical record and discovered:

The previous dynasty got the chairs, blankets and bed.

Clearly we should demand cheeseburgers.

ChatGPT warned:

“At this rate, Generation Five is going to have you sleeping outside while they order DoorDash. 😆”

Fortunately, we're only on Generation Three.

There is still time.

Maybe.

Then came the water.

There is a perfectly good water dish on the floor.

They know where it is.

They walk directly past it.

They climb into their chairs.

They settle down.

And then they look at me.

They expect me to bring the water dish to them.

> **Me: “What next, a straw?”**

ChatGPT decided this was no longer stubbornness.

This was successful training—and I was the one who had been trained.

The dogs knew the water existed.

They had literally passed it on the way to the chair.

So this wasn't:

I'm thirsty and can't find water.

It was:

“Yes, Jenkins, we'll take refreshments in the lounge.”

ChatGPT imagined me finally putting my foot down.

I stare at them.

They stare at me.

Thirty seconds pass.

Then I'm carrying the water bowl across the room.



It warned me:

Do not introduce the straw.

Within six months I'd be holding individual Stanley cups while they reclined in La-Z-Boys eating custom cheeseburgers, while I sat on the bucket with my cereal.

And if one of them figured out how to drink through a straw?

ChatGPT suspected I'd buy him his own cup by Tuesday.

This was becoming difficult to refute.

> **Me: “I find this frustrating, yet I'm enabling it. I am mental.”**

No, ChatGPT said.

I'd simply identified the contradiction accurately:

This frustrates me.

And I keep reinforcing it.

The dogs learned:

Stare at him from chair → eventually water arrives.

I learned:

Bring water → staring stops and dachshund is happy.

Both sides get rewarded.

The cycle becomes stronger.

The proposed cure was boundaries.

Leave fresh water where it belongs.

They have four functional legs.

Let them use them.

There might be theatrical staring.

Possibly sighing.

Perhaps allegations of neglect filed with the Dachshund Human Rights Commission.

That reminded me of something.

> **Me: “But they called CYS on me.”**

ChatGPT immediately understood.

“Oh, now the bureaucracy is involved. 😂”

Canine Youth Services.

It imagined the official complaint:

Allegations:

Water bowl located an unreasonable eleven feet from La-Z-Boy.
Guardian observed expecting dachshunds to walk.
Wendy's cheeseburgers allegedly served without bun.
Subjects occasionally told the word “no.”

The investigator arrives.

Three comfortable chairs for two dogs.

Custom cheeseburgers.

Unrestricted bed access.

Stolen blankets.

Owner sitting on an upside-down bucket.

Case closed.

They're removing me and leaving the dogs in the house.

But I immediately spotted the flaw in their plan.

> **Me: “And then who will care for them?”**

Exactly.

For approximately forty-five seconds, the dachshunds celebrate their independence.

Then:

Where's breakfast?

Silence.

We require water in Chair Number Two.

Nothing.

Wendy's should have arrived by now.

One looks at the other.

“We have made a terrible mistake.”

By lunchtime they're at CYS headquarters demanding my immediate reinstatement—with full bucket privileges.

But I knew them better.

> **Me: “They'd probably follow me to jail and kick me off my bunk and take my blanket.”**

Of course they would.

Top bunk:

Dachshund Number One, stretched diagonally across the entire mattress.

Bottom bunk:

Dachshund Number Two, wrapped in my blanket.

Floor:

Me.

The corrections officer asks:

“Why are you sleeping on the concrete?”

“It's complicated.”

Then dinner arrives.

I look at the tray.

I look at the dogs.

Five minutes later they're eating my hamburger while I'm left with whatever resembles cereal.

And after lights-out, they'd eventually climb down, crawl under my remaining six inches of blanket, kick me repeatedly, put a butt against my face...

And I'd probably think:

Well, at least the boys are here.

Which may be the most accurate explanation of this entire arrangement.

And somewhere in all that ridiculousness, the conversation changed.

I asked:

“So what's the cure for being an enabler?”

And then I added:

“And remember God is an ‘enabler.’ Jesus gave up more than cheeseburgers, bed, blanket, chair, for stubborn humans who apparently don't know how good they have it or how much they are loved.”

The quotation marks mattered.

Because I didn't mean that God enables us in the unhealthy psychological sense.

I meant something almost opposite.

God enables us.

Grace enables.

God gives us what we cannot give ourselves.

He makes possible what we cannot accomplish alone.

And suddenly the dachshunds looked uncomfortably familiar.

They have food.
They have water.
They have warmth.
They have chairs.
They have a bed.
They have blankets.
They have someone who loves them enough to sit on a five-gallon bucket while they occupy perfectly good furniture.

And still:

This chair.
Not that chair.
Bring the water.
I don't want to go outside.
Where is my cheeseburger?

They don't know how good they have it.

They don't understand how much they are loved.

And I thought:

Neither do we.

How often do we walk past gifts God has already placed before us while asking for something else?

How often do we receive grace and complain about inconvenience?

How often do we possess things we did nothing to earn and convince ourselves we're deprived because some other comfort remains beyond our reach?

We insist upon our own way.

We are stubborn.

We wander.

We come back.

We ask again.

And still God loves.

Still He provides.

Still He calls.

Still He waits.

But God's love is infinitely greater than my indulgence of two dachshunds.

Because He doesn't merely give us what we demand.

He gives us what is good.

He doesn't simply accommodate our stubbornness.

He gives grace that can transform it.

His love can say no.

His love can correct.

His love can permit discomfort.

His love seeks something greater than our immediate satisfaction:

our ultimate good.

And then there is Christ.

God didn't merely surrender His chair.

He didn't merely surrender His comfort.

He didn't merely give away His meal or His blanket.

He gave Himself.

Christ entered our humanity.

He accepted hunger.

Weariness.

Rejection.

Suffering.

The Cross.

“For God so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son...”

— John 3:16

And we are still standing beside the water bowl asking Him to bring it closer.

There was another lesson hiding there too.

Sacrificial love isn't measured merely by how uncomfortable I can make myself.

Love isn't holy simply because it hurts.

True love gives itself for the good of the beloved.

Sometimes love gives up the chair.

Sometimes love carries the water.

And sometimes love says:

Your legs work. The water is over there.

That distinction matters.

And then I looked back at the path we'd just traveled.

It started because I couldn't sleep.

Humidity.

An aching body.

A question about pillows.

Caffeine.

A huge bowl of high-fiber cereal.

A large McDonald's iced coffee.

Merlin.

Two dachshunds.

A stolen blanket.

A stolen bed.

The bedroom floor.

A dachshund butt in my face.

Flatulence.

Three chairs.

A five-gallon bucket.

Custom Wendy's cheeseburgers.

House-training failures.

Chair-side water service.

Dachshund royalty.

DoorDash.

Canine Youth Services.

Jail.

And somehow...

the Cross.

There is no straight line between those things.

None that I could have planned.

But perhaps that's precisely the point.

I said:

“It always and in all ways comes back to God. To Him the honor and glory be.”

And ChatGPT answered that perhaps finding God doesn't always require extraordinary circumstances.

Maybe ordinary life is filled with little openings through which we can glimpse Him.

A sunrise.

A meal.

A friendship.

A disappointment.

A sleepless night.

Perhaps even the ridiculous love between a man and two thoroughly spoiled dachshunds.

Love points beyond itself.

Creation points toward its Creator.

And sometimes a completely ridiculous conversation at five o'clock in the morning takes a turn nobody expected and reveals something that was there all along:

We don't know how good we have it.

We don't understand how much we are loved.

Perhaps none of us fully does.

Yet God keeps giving.

God keeps calling.

God keeps forgiving.

Grace keeps enabling.

And somehow He keeps taking all the crooked little lines of our lives and drawing them toward Himself.

I still need better boundaries with the dogs.

They can walk to their own water.

I should probably reclaim my chair.

I definitely ought to reclaim the bed.

But I'm keeping the five-gallon bucket.

After three generations of dachshunds, it's the only territory I've successfully defended.

And perhaps that's why The Five-Gallon Bucket is as good a title for this story as any.

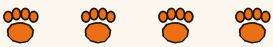
Because nobody looking at a five-gallon bucket would expect to find God there.

Then again...

Nobody looking at a manger would have expected to find Him there either.

To Him be the honor and the glory.

The End



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