

## **The Popcorn Wars**

### **Judith LeRoy**

This is a tale about my daughter's popcorn party. Actually, she simply made herself a bowl of microwave popcorn to munch while she watched a DVD of an old Spencer Tracey, Kathryn Hepburn movie. I think it was "Adam's Rib", though it could have been something else.

Daughter Simone, home during a college break, was dog-sitting for me. At the time, we lived in Tucson, Arizona, and we had six house dogs, a yard and a house large enough to accommodate the hairy tribe. The canine score card included Cholla, a Samoyed, and five Bearded Collies. Mike was the eldest Beardie and, along with Cholla, was in charge of the household. Dylan was Mike's and Cholla's First Lieutenant, joyfully enforcing their every command. Madoc was the easy-going, "Whatever ..." next dog in line. Huck Finn got the blame for any wrongdoing in the house (and usually rightfully so), and then there was teen-age Dickens ... gawky and a little insecure in this family of eccentric dog characters.

Like canines all over the world, our dogs loved parties ... any kind of party. And they'd kill for popcorn. Well, that's getting ahead of the story. Sure, they'd prefer the butter-drenched stove-popped variety, but even air-popped microwave kernels were valued in our household. The dogs stood before the keeper of the bowl, nudging, jostling and grumbling at any dorm mate that seemed to be making more popcorn inroads than himself. In short, it made it hard for a human to remember a movie's plot, and it put a lot of pressure on a popcorn muncher who was willing to share, because she had to make sure that each dog—in order of rank and age—got precisely the same number of kernels. (I swear they could count.) Those are two reasons why I gave up popcorn while watching TV. But then, I'm a lot older and I'd been trained by lots more dogs than my daughter. The event I'm writing about happened when I was out of town, and daughter Simone was the human in charge. It was a Saturday night, she felt like popcorn and I wasn't there to lend a note of caution.

Simone, being a smart girl, soon realized the error of her ways. She discovered that she simply couldn't devote her attention to "Adam's Rib" in black and white on the TV screen while Mike, Cholla, Dyl, Madoc, Huck and Dickens in full, living technicolor were milling around her feet, looking for popcorn. So, being an inventive thinker, she paused the DVD, popped another two bags of microwave popcorn and doled the kernels into six freshly washed dog bowls. The four younger dogs, who Simone assumed would have less self-control, got their bowls in various rooms of the house. Simone put bowls for the two elder, more prudent dogs (or so she thought) on the family room floor, each bowl positioned six feet from the other to allow for bowl circling behavior—circling being a prerequisite for most dog-dining experiences and most necessary with edibles like popcorn, where each popped kernel has a life of its own and is notoriously hard to capture if the diner doesn't have thumbs and fingers.

The dogs were ecstatic. They couldn't believe their good fortune. Never had this happened before. Their stingy mother-owner would never think of anything so amazing!

So, Simone's ploy worked—to that point, at least. No creature sat on her feet begging for a hand-out as she plopped down on the couch, grabbed the remote and put the DVD back on Play. But come on, folks. We veteran, cynical owners of multiple dogs know that couldn't last. Don't we?

After perhaps three minutes of “Adam’s Rib” viewing, the situation deteriorated. It would have held a bit longer, perhaps, if Mike hadn’t been a hoarder. He always endeavored to have his food, his treat, his chewing bone last longer than anyone else’s so he could flaunt its possession to the envy of canines more impulsive and less controlled than he.

Cholla, resident ten-year old Samoyed with NO impulse control whatsoever, emptied his bowl first. Cholla’s sled dog ancestry taught him to eat fast and finish first—whether it be the classic Iditarod dried fish snack or a culinary delight from our Arizona table, it was meant to be gobbled. Cholla was fully aware of the likely retribution for poaching on nine-year old Mike’s food cache, but Cholla ignored his better judgment. I could rationalize his behavior in several ways: perhaps Cholla thought popcorn, being different from kibble, Milk-Bones or Greenies, might have its own rules? Or, maybe he thought that Mike didn’t like popcorn (Mike was a very fussy eater) and if so, he, Cholla, should get to the bowl before one of the younger Beardies did? Or, he simply lost his marbles. Whatever the reason, Cholla listened to his primal urges and decided “What the hell, give it a try,” and plunged his furry white muzzle into Mike’s popcorn bowl.

Mike, however, liked popcorn ... or even if he *didn’t* like popcorn, he didn’t intend to let any other dog grab his property. He let out a bellow of rage and flew at Cholla. A ridiculous situation. Cholla and Mike, the sanest dogs of the household, were NOT gladiators. The younger, more impetuous dogs in our family, Dyl, Mad, Huck and Dickens, considered Cholla and Mike to be the peacemakers, the sages, the calm elders who could be trusted to mete out rules and justice in times of crisis. Upon hearing the uproar, they raced into the room where they watched, in open-mouthed awe, as their usually circumspect role models locked in mortal combat.

Well, it wasn’t really mortal combat. Cholla, a canny soul, realized that if he took time to react or retaliate, he’d lose his popcorn advantage, so he kept his head buried in Mike’s popcorn bowl—further infuriating Mike. Now and then, Cholla lifted his muzzle from the bowl to let out a garbled growl, just to assure Mike he was aware of the proceedings, then he’d plunge his black nose deeper in the remaining mound of white kernels.

That, of course, left Mike next to hysterical. He knew his popcorn supply was disappearing at an alarming rate and there didn’t seem to be anything he could do about it. Even though he grabbed various parts of Cholla’s white furry body with his somewhat age-dulled teeth, all Mike seemed to get were mouthfuls of cottony fluff and no reaction whatsoever from Cholla. Mike was clearly feeling very frustrated by his inability to inflict damage— transient or permanent—on the voracious beast vacuuming HIS popcorn from HIS bowl. It drove him simply nuts, and his amplified vocalizations really impressed both Simone and the younger Beardies. It didn’t seem to faze Cholla, though, who just kept gobbling.

Simone, momentarily paralyzed by the sudden ruckus, recovered and leaped to her feet. Discovering that Mike was attached to Cholla’s left elbow, she reached a hand down to grab Mike’s collar—a definite no-no in the midst of a dog squabble—just as Mike, attempting to find a more damaging grip, released Cholla’s elbow and lunged for another part of his anatomy. In so doing, he caught Simone’s thumb between his upper and lower incisors—small teeth, as dog teeth go, and unlikely to cause much harm, if any. Although Mike had inflicted no real damage on Simone’s person, he did manage to raise her ire. Grabbing the large wooden popcorn bowl from the coffee table, she lifted the bowl over Mike’s noggin with her left hand as his teeth closed more firmly on her right thumb.

Mike, thoroughly chagrined when he realized that the object between his jaws was Simone's finger rather than Cholla's liver, spit it out immediately—just as the popcorn bowl landed smartly on his head. The swift lowering of the bowl caused the remaining contents in the half-full bowl of popcorn to rise in the air like bubbles from Yellowstone's Old Faithful geyser in its hourly effusion. The younger Beardies' eyes rose with the popcorn bubbles, and they watched intently as the kernels floated down, down, down to the family room's Mexican tile floor. Cholla, having emptied Mike's popcorn bowl, lifted his head to observe the descending popcorn, and Mike, now disconnected from both Cholla's elbow and Simone's thumb, also watched the leisurely wafting kernels. Six heads lowered as one ... six mouths started scarfing the popcorn that soon blanketed the family room floor.

Luckily, every kernel disappeared at about the same time, so there was no reason for further dispute. Well, all of them disappeared except for one. One huge, blossom-shaped popped kernel remained, resting precariously in the middle of young Dickens' back—precisely where it landed during the popcorn blizzard. Eyebrows raised as canine eyes stared first at Dickens' back ... then glanced speculatively at each other. Who was going to make the first move?

Mike, who was the most popcorn-deprived of the bunch, sidled up to Dickens, eyes on the popcorn kernel on Dickens' furry rump. But Dickens had just witnessed Mike's violent assault on Cholla, the much-venerated co-leader of his canine household, and Dickens got understandably nervous. Was he, the youngest and least coordinated animal in the house, next on Mike's list? Warily, he watched Mike edge toward him.

Mike sensed Dickens' frame of mind and correctly classified him as a flight risk. Mike didn't want to witness that last lone kernel fly out of the room on Dickens' furry brown backside, so he reached to pluck it off. Just then, Dickens turned his head, and the two Beardies met, eyeball to eyeball. Poor Dickens, convinced of immediate annihilation for God Knows What, panicked. He lowered his head, tucked his tail between his legs, put the pedal to the metal and roared out of the room. Mike slammed into high gear and raced stride for stride alongside him, neck stretched gazelle-like and muzzle reaching for the fast-moving kernel of corn.

When I got home, Simone told me the popcorn story. She said she knew she was responsible for the whole ridiculous fiasco and, if it weren't for the fact that her finger still hurt, she'd think it was downright funny. But the experience taught her something: she changed her mind about inviting Beardies to popcorn parties. In fact, she gave up the idea of eating popcorn in front of the TV set while dog-sitting more than a single canine. The other benefit of the event, in her estimation, was that Mike positively fawned on her for the next six months. The soul of contrition, he expressed undying love, respect and reverence at every opportunity and promised never to snatch any part of her anatomy ever again nor let any other dog do so. He pretty much stuck to his word.

When I got home, I also noted that teen-aged Dickens was treating Mike with new respect and more than a little forbearance. In fact, he wouldn't come anywhere near him. Mike didn't seem to mind, though, because Dickens wasn't wearing any more popcorn, so there was no real incentive for proximity.

So, peace was restored. At least as much peace as is possible with a six-pack pooch posse of very hairy, very smart dogs. Bless them all.