

Maxing Out: Julie Howard

It was one of those awful festive occasions – you know the ones I mean, no one wants to be there, but hey, family pressure says you gotta be.

On the day, Matt our nephew (birthday boy) arrives, late but unrepentant. His girlfriend (possibly) trails, phone in hand, blue hair glittering in the fading sun.

We hug briefly making as little body contact as possible.

My sister Karen, awash with relief, rushes to greet them. Chrystal, (the girlfriend?) gives a flicker of a smile before turning away, while vacant eyed Matt pats his mum on the shoulder. His eyes wander. Disappointment looms.

By now the entrée platters have warmed and faded in the hot sun, but the guests have swigged enough prosecco and beer to forget family feuds and are chattering happily – that is until Matt and Chrystal cast their chill among them.

Uncle Bob is desperately dousing the kebabs with marinade in the vague hope that he can revive them from their shrivelled selves. Finally, hunger sends a bevy of guests rushing to serve their signature dishes and for a moment the mood lifts. The clatter and the chatter of voices rise into the sultry air.

Birthday presents are opened and discarded, and the feast denounced as being commercial, gluten, sugar-filled crap.

The Pavlova sinks in desperation.

Matt drags the unfortunate Chrystal to the door where Maximillian, our great uncle sweeps in with his new wife Gloria. He kisses Karen swings her around, and with his huge croaking laugh bellows ‘Hello darlin.’ Must be time to salsa.’

He knocks back a couple of the dried-out kebabs, picks up the sax that Gloria hands to him and starts to swing. ‘When the saints come marching in’ sets the tone.

The first knock on the door is a neighbour whose complaints are quickly quelled by a beer or two. The second is a group of Max’s mates bearing instruments. At 3.00am we finish up with a conga line cheered by clapping neighbours who hang from their windows and balconies.

On Facebook the next day I smile, as I read about Matt’s lame family birthday. Ha! if only he knew!