

Huxley Harrison thought he would be stuck on olives forever. He had stood for seven hours a day, for six months placing one slippery black olive onto the centre of each pizza as they sped by on the conveyor belt. This was not how his life was meant to be. Huxley used to have plans. He used to have ambition. Huxley also used to love olives. He used to savour plain black or green, stuffed or marinated, especially those filled with chillies. But now he detested them. He couldn't bear to look at their waxy rubber coats. And the thought of even placing one near his mouth filled him with dread. However, he did have a certain begrudging respect for them. After all, the olive was King Harry's unique selling point.

Huxley also used to hate his fellow workers for they had snubbed any attempts at conversation during lunch and tea breaks and shunned him on the production line. He had wanted nothing more than to leave King Harry's far behind. But he was trapped by £10,000 of debt accrued from a modern history degree and a year of applying for 456 jobs in the media. He'd had three interviews but received no job offers except for internships on *Paint Removal Monthly* and its sister title, *Cornice Restoration*. Both roles were unpaid and in London, over two hours away by train. Unlike some of his friends' parents, his were unwilling to help anyone but themselves. His father had left long ago and his mother, although physically in the family home, drank herself absent most days.

So during his induction day at King Harry's, Huxley could do nothing more but bite his tongue as Audrey, the supervisor, a wiry woman in her 30s with buck teeth, told him how lucky he was to get the job as a factory operative.

“Congratulations Huxley! You beat 203 applicants,” she said. “It was a close call between you and another young man.”

Audrey leant towards him conspiratorially.

“But he had a few personal hygiene problems,” she said crinkling her nose in disgust. “Do you have high hygiene standards, Huxley?”

Huxley was taken aback by the question.

“Of course I do,” he said surreptitiously sniffing his armpits as she turned away to pass him his mug of tea.

He took a sip of the sweet, sickly mixture and his heart sank as he thought about how awful the 201 other applicants must have been. Getting the job had initially cheered Huxley up. He had been looking forward to earning some money and feeling some pride in going to work every day. But with Audrey’s revelation each drop of happiness was rapidly dissolving.

“He also had a rotten attitude towards pizzas and ideas above his station. Do you have ideas above your station, Huxley?” said Audrey. “Modern history wasn’t it?” she added suddenly, making Huxley jump in his chair.

“Yes,” muttered Huxley.

“Very interesting I’m sure for a hobby but not very practical in the world of pizzas,” said Audrey, patting his knee, not waiting for him to answer.

“We don’t need to know the key dates of the Second World War or why Hitler invaded Poland while we’re making a nice pepperoni pizza for little Bobby’s birthday party. It’s all part of our APE.”

“Sorry?” said Huxley suddenly thrown by the introduction of primates into the conversation.

“APE! It’s in your induction manual, Huxley. It stands for Ace Pizza Experience. It’s what we all strive for here at King Harry’s.”

“Oh,” said Huxley, feeling as though Audrey may as well have smashed a sledgehammer down on his head and mashed his brain. “Our pizzas lift people’s spirits, Huxley. That’s all people really want during a recession – a cheap yummy King Harry’s Pizza. It helps to take their minds off their money worries and to see the positive things in life.

“This other chap thought that pizzas were below him. He had a degree in geography and reckoned he could name every country we source our ingredients from. A bit of a smart Alec although not so clever at finding his way around the personal hygiene products in Boots,” smiled Audrey insincerely.

Huxley nodded his head in agreement, noting that the last smidgen of glee had finally left him.

He watched Audrey stare wistfully at the production line while crunching on her ginger nut and hoped this marked the end of Audrey’s tirade against modern history.

“You’ll never get on with an attitude like that at King Harry’s! That’s not how I became supervisor, I can tell you that for nothing!” said Audrey sweeping away the crumbs from the corners of her mouth with her pointy, lizard-like tongue.

After they’d finished their mugs of tea, Audrey showed him around the huge cavernous factory of shiny metal fixtures and fittings and bright white walls covered in signs telling people not to smoke, run or talk. Huxley had always been curious about the factory. Nearly everyone in the town had a mum, dad, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, cousin or friend who worked at King Harry’s. And everyone had a freezer packed full of King Harry pizzas whether they liked them or not. Huxley was

struck by the loyalty that King Harry's inspired among the workforce. He'd never heard a bad word about the factory which dominated the pretty town and harbour, sitting on the hillside like an ugly scar. But Huxley always thought there was something malevolent about the factory, the way it consumed most of the town's working population in its 24 hour a day production, the smell of pizza permeating the town, messing with people's appetites. What was also odd was how the sea mist's icy fingers chose to clasp onto the factory buildings, leaving nearby streets mist-free and bathed in sunshine, as if it were in league with King Harry to hide its dark secrets from prying eyes.

Huxley patiently observed the factory operatives expertly sprinkling grated cheese on top of the pizzas and pasting tomato sauce on pale doughy bases.

"It's an art form isn't it Huxley?" said Audrey as they both stared in admiration at the mysterious gloved hands tossing pizza bases through a small square window from the bakery onto the production line.

"You can work your way up to the bakery but first we'll be starting you off on the olive station," said Audrey taking him to the end of the production line where a squat middle-aged man was placing an olive in the centre of each pizza as they sped past. The man dipped a pudgy hand into the huge vat of black olives standing before him and deftly grabbed a handful. His fat fingers were surprisingly agile as they delicately placed an olive in the centre of each pizza. After five minutes, Huxley was allowed to take over the task but found himself unable to keep up with the speed of the conveyor belt and several pizzas whizzed by olive-less. The production line quickly stopped and everyone turned to look at Huxley. Audrey came rushing over.

“It’s okay Huxley! We’ll keep it slower this morning. By this afternoon, you’ll have the hang of it,” said Audrey.

Huxley blushed. He felt useless and pathetic. He couldn’t even put an olive on a pizza properly. No wonder no-one had wanted to employ him, thought Huxley. But within ten minutes, Huxley had finally got the hang of centring olives and Audrey gave the nod for the production line to speed up.

Huxley had assumed that the operatives would be moved around from one task to another regularly to avoid boredom. He had also assumed that his training would last one day at the most. But on the second day, Huxley had still not been assigned to any other task other than placing an olive in the middle of a pizza. He spent his time enviously watching the other operatives switch from cheese sprinkling to tomato pasting from pepperoni placing to pineapple chunk arranging. Huxley was itching to get his hands into the cheese and feel it dropping from his fingers onto the never ending circle of pizzas. At night, he even began dreaming about delicately pasting on a luxurious bed of tomato sauce for slices of ham and pineapple, showering the production line with grated cheese and kneading the doughy bases without any gloves on.

At the end of his third day, he’d put his extended olive duty down to an impromptu visit by Fatcat Supermarkets who were doing a spot check on the production of their new range aimed at young girls, Princess Pizzas. Huxley assumed that Audrey had wanted to keep the new boy on a simple task so that he wouldn’t mess up the production line during their visit. Princess Pizzas were regular sized pizzas covered in tomato sauce, with an olive, of course, but one that had been bleached then dyed

pink. The whole pizza was finished off with a sprinkling of edible gold and silver glitter. After being wrapped in plastic, the pizzas were then inserted into pink boxes decorated with pictures of a benevolent King Harry and his beautiful flaxen-haired daughter, Princess Margareta. Huxley understood. He didn't want to ruin Audrey's perfect production line either. So, he stood all day, apart from his half an hour lunch break and his two ten minute tea breaks, placing his olives slap bang in the centre of each pizza that flew past.

On day four, he put his enforced olive centring down to an oversight by Audrey after all the excitement of the Princess Pizzas. But by day five it suddenly dawned on Huxley that he was still in training. Audrey had quite clearly left him there because he was not up to doing any other pizza-making related tasks. Huxley desperately wanted to find out what was going on.

So, at morning tea break he plucked up the courage to ask a kindly looking lady in her 60s, who had once smiled at him in the canteen. But as soon as he approached she scuttled into the toilets. Huxley was initially stunned by her reaction and then felt a rage burn through him. He waited for her to come out.

"Why am I always on olives?" he demanded.

"You're the new olive boy," she whispered as if that were all the answer he needed.

"What do you mean, the new olive boy?" asked Huxley desperately. All sorts of hideous situations crept into his mind. Did this mean he would be the olive boy forever? That this was all he would ever achieve? And what happened to the old olive boy? Had King Harry executed him for not centring the olives?

"Shhh! Keep your voice down, boy! They watch and hear everything. You're never alone at King Harry's!"

Huxley followed her vacant blue eyes around the room where they flickered up to the ceiling. Four cameras zoomed down on them. Huxley stormed over to Audrey's office, knocking crossly at the door.

"What can I do for you Huxley?" asked Audrey, not bothering to look up at him.

"I'd like to do something other than olives please."

"Do you want this job Huxley? Because as I said there are hundreds out of there who'd bite your hand off for a job here," she said finally looking up.

"Well, yes," swallowed Huxley, remembering all the unopened and unpaid bills littering the kitchen table at home.

"Well, let's not run before we've learnt to walk then, Huxley."

"But it's just putting olives on a pizza."

"Oh is it now!" said Audrey, standing up from her chair sharply and marching towards Huxley. "That's exactly what he said."

"Who said?"

"Your predecessor, the old olive boy."

"What happened to him?"

"He couldn't centre."

"What do you mean?"

"He kept missing!"

"How can you not centre!" said Huxley to himself.

"Exactly! I like your attitude Huxley." Audrey said as she glanced at her watch. "Tea break over. Back to work now, Huxley. You show us how you can centre those olives boy!"

But after two weeks of centring olives, Huxley now understood why the old olive boy hadn't been able to centre. His fingers were refusing to do what he told them. They were aching from being in the same position day in day out. At night he even bathed them in a bowl of hot water to ease the muscle cramps. They wanted to be stretched. They were threatening to go on strike. And on day 14 Huxley gave into their demands. He looked around furtively and then placed two olives just off centre, then another three and four, until the pizzas were decorated with five olives spread in a cross. Someone, somewhere would get a big olive surprise, smiled Huxley to himself. He felt his heart bursting with joy at the thought that his olive formation was probably groundbreaking, that it had probably never been attempted at King Harry's before. He didn't care if he got into trouble. He felt free for the first time in weeks. Then a few moments later, the production line came to an abrupt halt and everyone looked across at Huxley accusingly.

"I don't need to tell an intelligent young man like you, Huxley, that the olive is an integral part of the ace pizza experience," said Audrey who had escorted him into her office for his own safety.

"We don't like people messing with our magic formula, Huxley! And they," she said gesturing to the workers standing around the still production line glaring in at the office, "don't like being messed around."

"The olive is why Fatcat Supermarkets buy our pizzas for 50 pence each and are able to sell them to their customers for £4.99. An olive screams quality, Huxley. It brings a bit of class into the little people's lives. It's like finding a Belgian praline in a cheap box of fruit centres. People do not want to see five olives on their pizzas. With

one olive, they think they're lucky. If we give them five, they will think: why not six or seven? Comprendo?"

"Yes," muttered Huxley, his heart sinking further than he ever thought possible.

"All you need to remember is that the olive is King Harry's signature. And King Harry is like a god round here. You don't want to anger a god, do you, Huxley?" said Audrey who was standing so close to Huxley that he could smell her tea breath.

"No! Of course not," said Huxley, feeling suddenly humbled.

"Well then, centre the olives Huxley and King Harry may find it in his heart to forgive you. But first of all what do you say to King Harry?"

"Sorry," mumbled Huxley feeling like a small child again.

"Say it like you mean it," shouted Audrey.

"I'm sorry, King Harry!" said Huxley.

"Go APE, Huxley! I know you've got it in you," said Audrey, patting him on his back.

Huxley resisted the urge to push Audrey away and tell her where he'd like to stick her precious pizzas. He had a brain. He had ambition. He wanted a proper job where he could shine. But he remembered the final reminder for the gas bill that his mother still hadn't paid.

Huxley forced himself to smile. "But...but when can I do something else, like cheese sprinkling?"

"Your time will come. King Harry will know when you're ready."

Six months later when Huxley arrived for work one morning, Audrey and all the operatives were gathered in the locker room. As he pushed open the door, they suddenly erupted into cheers and applause. Some were even punching the air with joy.

“Congratulations Huxley!” said Audrey, thrusting a pizza-shaped piece of paper at him.

“You’ve done us proud! We’re moving you onto cheese!”

Huxley felt himself blush at the attention. He looked down at the piece of paper in his shaky hands. It was a certificate. It read: *You’ve gone APE on the Olive Station. Well done!* It had even been signed by King Harry himself with his huge, sloping, majestic signature.

“If you make a good job of cheese, the world is your oyster, Huxley! Come here!”

Audrey grabbed Huxley and squeezed him tightly.

“I knew you had it in you, Huxley!” she added.

Huxley tried to smile. King Harry may be watching. Anyway, why shouldn’t he be pleased with himself, thought Huxley. He wasn’t so useless after all. He felt a glow of satisfaction spread through him and grinned at the cameras.

Then he suddenly felt troubled. Would he be up to the job? His fingers had eventually knuckled down to some hard work after their rebellion but would they be able rise to the challenge and be flexible enough to sprinkle cheese? Doubts crashed in on Huxley and he felt faint. All the operatives filed past him, each and every one of them had snubbed him as the new olive boy, but now stopped to shake his hand and offer words of congratulations.

“You sit for a few minutes, Huxley. It’s a lot to take in. Then I’ll get you acquainted with the grated cheese,” said Audrey.

“But who’s going to do the olives?” asked Huxley panicking.

“Don’t worry,” said Audrey patting his head. “We have a new olive girl.”

A few minutes later, Huxley shook with joy as he donned his plastic gloves and plunged his hands into a huge tub of the grated cheese, feeling its coldness running between his fingers. He closed his eyes in ecstasy.

“Feels good, doesn’t it Huxley?” Audrey whispered.

Huxley smiled and glanced over at the olive station. The new olive girl was hard at work. She was young, maybe just 18. Her white overalls hung off her bony frame, her harsh profile partially hidden by the King Harry’s regulation cap. Huxley felt a sudden stab of pity as he watched her concentrating on centring each olive, and wondered if the thought of being stuck on olives forever had crossed her mind yet.

But he couldn’t spare the time to worry about the new girl. He had bigger fish to fry. Huxley had to focus on scooping out the exact amount of cheese required by King Harry for each pizza. That afternoon, just as he was feeling confident in his sprinkling abilities, the production line suddenly stopped. Everyone, including Huxley, immediately knew where the fault lay. They stared across at the new olive girl who was hunched over the conveyor belt, sobbing. She had somehow managed to knock over the vat of olives. They were now scattered over the belt and floor like mini-cockroaches. Huxley tutted. At this rate he would never get onto the tomato sauce station.

Ends

