

SHAGGY

I freely admit it was not the summer job of my dreams. But with the bottom falling off the non-skilled labor market, and all my social networking coming to naught, by mid-May I had no choice but to march to the Ministry of Labour's employment office and ask for anything.

Right off the bat, the customer service lady asked me if I wanted to be a forklift operator at a meat packing company's cinema-size freezer, but I would probably be lethal with a forklift. She went through numerous papers, then checked online, fetched a new stack from somewhere and after a while enquired if I would like to be a night watchman at the Helsinki Sailboat Association's marina. Of the five they own, this was the one furthest away from where I live, and I'd have spent hours every day commuting.

The next three jobs were not worth considering, or even reporting here. She grew more bored with each of my denials, and when she pulled out the last paper on the last stack, she was already waiting for my negative response. I was aware of my need to find something for the summer, so I decided I'd take whatever was on the last paper. "Would you like to be one of the characters at the Enchanted Troll Forest in Hartola?"

"Sure thing."

She looked very surprised, but handed me the papers and shoved me out of the door before I recanted.

On the tram I read the job description. They had revamped the troll forest and instead of having basketball-size puppets stuck in the bushes, they'd upgraded the trolls to live characters. There were 24 trolls in costumes, and they all had names and personalities, such as Lulu the Leading Lady, Cheesy the Chef and so on. My character was not listed on the job description, but I got the general idea. The tasks of the trolls were "customer service at the entrance, entertaining the visitors, selling merchandise at the cafeteria etc." Fine by me, I thought, it's better than laying asphalt on a highway.

A week later I hopped off the coach at the Enchanted Troll Forest at around ten in the morning. My first impression was that there was precious little enchantment about the place. It seemed as basic a Finnish forest as they come. The ETF, as we came to call it, was situated on a sand ridge, where tall pine trees dominated the landscape and the undergrowth was rich with blueberry. The size of the new parking lot hinted at an expected torrent of visitors. There was a new cafe cum merchandise store, an ice cream booth, a sales point for candy, and a hamburger joint. Behind these buildings stood the old troll forest cabin which I remembered from my own childhood. I shrugged - maybe it'll turn out okay.

I met mr Koski, the owner and manager, in the back room of the hamburger joint. He was a little greaseball of a man, and he shook my hand with vigor. "Welcome! Hmm... you're too tall for Matt the Marine. Let me check what I have left for tall guys." He popped into the

closet and fumbled about. "Since you're almost the last to arrive, there's not much choice. Meet Shaggy the Punk Rocker."

He came out with a character head, carved out of polystyrene and fitted with velcro straps, and painted with some pale skin-colored latex paint. It had bulging eyes the size of tennis balls that gave it a permanently surprised look, and hair that met the expectations raised by the name. I was supposed to see my way through the mouth. On the whole it looked like it was designed for a certain Marquis.

Mr Koski popped back and pulled out a blue IKEA bag. "This is the rest of the outfit. Since your character is a punk rocker, you got zippers and safety pins to spare, but the zippers are for effect only. The one in the front works. Sometimes the other trolls will ask you for safety pins when they rip the costumes."

I took out the costume, and held it against me. It had a jumpsuit for underwear, and the outside was some sort of faux leather, and the back was adorned with a pentagram and a sprayed-on "A". It had been fitted with about a hundred safety pins, and indeed, many zippers that went nowhere. It had more rivets than the Titanic. The collar had velcro sewn around it, on which I guessed I should fasten the strips hanging from the head. I was getting second thoughts, after I realized how hot it would be in that black costume when the heat set in. But right after that, I thought this was all I had for the summer, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Umm... about the name?" I said.

"What about it?"

"All the others rhyme. Cheesy the Chef, and Lulu the Leading Lady and so on, or at least there's some match between the name and the other part. But Shaggy the Punk Rocker?"

"Well yeah, I didn't think of that at the time, but we can't change it."

"Not even to Pete the Punk Rocker?"

"No, not even that," mr Koski said, "the business card are already printed. So Shaggy it is."

This caught me by surprise. "Business cards?"

The owner went to his desk and fumbled in the top drawer for a while, then pulled out a stack of cards in a plastic box. "Here they are... shaggy@e-trollforest.fi is your address. How do you like the domain name? I thought it's great, because the e can stand for enchanted, and then everything is e this and e that these days." He shoved the stack into my costume bag. "Let me show you the digs," he said, and led me out the back door of the hamburger joint.

Behind the building there was a parking lot on which eight caravans were on jacks. The outside of the trailers hinted at the short lifespan they had remaining, but as I winced without noticing, mr Koski said, "Not to worry, they're just great on the inside." He led me to the last on the left and opened the door. "Cheesy, Alfred, meet Shaggy. Shaggy, I'll leave you to the

capable hands of the oldtimers. We have a team meeting at eleven.” With that he left, whistling *“We’re off to see the Wizard”*.

I entered the cabin, where the two other characters sat at the table. The pudgy one with a fifties hairdo spoke first. “Hi - I’m Jussi, but we’re supposed to use only character names here, so I’m Cheesy the Chef.” The other guy, probably a PhysEd student, rose to shake my hand. “I’m Matti, also known as Alfred the Athlete. So you were slapped with Shaggy.”

I shook his hand and put my costume bag on the floor. “Can you guys fill me in a bit? I mean, I have no clue...”

Within half an hour I had the basics. We were supposed to be scary but not frightening, and we mustn’t talk in costume, as it would ruin the atmosphere. We’d meet the kids after they had paid the admission, and we’d snatch the kids from the parents. There were paths in the forest, along which we had tasks we could make the kids do. If they did well, they’d get a prize from a hidden stash, of which there were many all over the forest. If they did less well, or if they were total suckers, we’d give them a coupon for an ice cream at the cafeteria. And all the while the parents were spending time and money at the merchandise shop right by the exit.

The team meeting at eleven was something out of a magic mushroom dream. There was a troll for every occasion, and every occupation it seemed. Most of the costumes were well made and looked even a bit enchanted, especially the ladies who probably had been selected by the bra size. My Shaggy looked like I’d been fishing too close to a power line, what with my Einstein hair. I was also the only one with an appellation referring to music, all the others were more respectable. Damn.

Mr Koski arrived and knocked on the table. “Hello all, and thanks for attending. (“Did we have a choice?”) I’ve compiled last week’s stats and they look good, even if it was only the second week of the summer. This week we expect much more folks, and you all must work hard so as to get the grapevine flowing with good reviews – it’s our main advertising channel. I’ve got more prizes for the kids, and before we open, everyone will go and grab a basket of them and replenish the caches in the bush. Alfred will help Shaggy and show the cache map. Any questions? Okay, gate opens at noon, so let’s go, folks.”

I followed Alfred out to a wooden warehouse behind the parking lot. In it were hundreds of items, cheap Chinese toys, coloring books, snorkels, puzzles, you name it. Alfred picked a variety of things into a basket and took me to a map of the area. “This red line is the main path. The blue circles are task spots. The green dots are caches. Most of them are to the other side of the task spot as seen from the path. You’ll soon know every one of them. Let’s go and load my spot’s cache.”

Down the path we went, preceded and followed by other trolls. It had a curious feeling of a funeral procession. One by one trolls left the path to man the task spots and wait for kids walking down the paths. Alfred walked far down the path before leaving it to go to a hoop in a pine tree. “This is my sports spot. The kids are to throw a ball through the hoop. The less tries, the better the prize,” he said and led me a bit further. In the ground was a little hillock, which

he opened. It had a hinged lid, and there was a Styrofoam box in the ground, in which he laid his prizes. "So, like, with five tries they get a puzzle and ten gets them a dart game etc."

I asked, "What about the ones who don't get it done at all?"

Alfred shrugged. "Ice cream and shove them along."

"What's my task going to be?"

Alfred explained I was one of the trolls without a fixed spot. We were to roam the forest and snatch remaining kids from their parents, and then go to the nearest free task spot. There were thirty of them so some were always unmanned. I thanked Alf and returned to the entrance to see the horde.

By noon, there were only four cars, but by 12.30 the parking lot was pretty busy. People loaded the baby carts with kids and sunshades and lunch bags and assorted stuff, and went to pay. The kids got armbands and admired them as they set out down the path. Every now and again, a troll would come up to the family and lead one or two of the kids away from the parents in a mock kidnap. They'd be reunited at the coffee shop, right after the parents had had enough time to spend cash buying mementoes and grisly little action figures.

My first day went okay, except for one time when a ten year old kid asked me to mosh, if I was a punk rocker. I did a few excited head bobs for a very impressive mosh display, but the velcro straps failed and my head went tumbling down the path and into the blueberries. The kid almost wet his pants with laughter but his two siblings, twins of maybe four, were frightened as hell by the headless troll. By the time I retrieved my head and got most of the pine needles out of the hair, the trio had vanished down the path, one laughing and two bawling their heads off.

I learned the locations of all the task spots and the associated caches. I also learned how to use my hands and head movements as a means of communication. Alfred and Cheesy showed me a Marx Brothers movie, *Horse Feathers* as I remember, and told me to watch how Harpo moved. I got many hints, and on my first day off, I went to Motonet and bought myself a rubber horn. That worked like a charm with my character.

By early July I was an old hand. Since I was a freewheeling troll, I used to loiter at the parking lot fence, checking incoming tourists and identifying possible targets. One afternoon I spotted a BMW X5 arrive, with a Lexus in tow. That raised eyebrows, as most of the cars were Toyotas and Hyundais and the like. The driver of the BMW stood beside his car, stretched and opened the back door for the kids. One was a boy of maybe 12, another a girl a bit younger, and then there was a 3-year old boy. A trolley was set up for the youngest, and he sat in it with a royal ambiance.

The Lexus had a woman driver who had a kid about one year old. She set him up in a trolley too. Mrs BMW started a discussion with the woman right away and for the most part ignored her own family. Mr BMW pushed the trolley and hustled the two kids in front of him, and the little party proceeded to the gate.

I followed with keen interest. In five more minutes, I had it figured out. The boy was Mr BMW's own from a previous marriage, the girl was Mrs BMW's mistake by some poor sod, and the kid in the trolley was the fruit of their mutual love. The Lexus driver was Mrs BMW's sister. I could tell by the way the girl was treated by the man that she wasn't given the same appreciation as the other two. She got her armband last, she was talked to in an irritated manner, and she was made to walk last down the path. I named them Golden Boy, Princess, and Cupid, and I decided to kidnap her, not the others.

When they were a bit down the path, I jumped out of the bush, much to the consternation of Cupid, who promptly began crying. I made a few agitated hand movements to indicate I wanted to take Princess to the left of the path, but when Golden Boy tried to follow, I honked my horn and forbid him from following. I looked at Princess through my character mouth and gave her a wink. The eyes of the girl were alight when she left the others behind and grabbed my hand to follow me into the Enchanted Troll Forest. I turned back and shoved the others along the way, which wasn't to the liking of Golden Boy, but they'd be picked up by someone else.

First I took Princess to the Magic Hoop. She tried the throw only thrice before getting it right. I honked three times and went to the cache, and pulled out a Frisbee with an ETF logo. Mind you, that was the only true quality item in the cache. We only were supposed to take the kids to one task, but we went across the path to the Bewitched Climbing Wall. She made it to the top very fast. She definitely glowed with delight when I honked four times, and pulled a 1,000 piece puzzle from the cache – no matter it was a seaside image of Venice.

The last spot I could do for this kidnap was the Pirate Troll Swing, where the kids had to use ropes to cross a crocodile-infested river. Princess was on a roll and could do anything, and she managed this challenge without a hitch. I clapped my hands and took her to the cache, and let her select her prize, which was strictly forbidden. She looked at all the stuff in the box, and selected a pink diary with a lock and a mirror on the front cover. My heart melted when she smiled her thanks and took me by the hand.

We met the rest of the family at the hamburger joint. When the beaming Princess showed her prizes to Mr BMW, he took all of them, and gave the Frisbee to Golden Boy, and the puzzle to Cupid. Cupid looked absolutely thrilled about the puzzle, and ripped open the box, dropping all the one thousand pieces on the sand. Princess was distraught at this, and when Mr BMW took her diary, she was positively in pain. He looked at the diary, broke the lock, leafed the empty pages, dropped it in the trash and said, "Not worth bringing home." She deflated back into her brow-beaten old self and cast me a dejected glance.

I stood a few meters away and couldn't believe my eyes. How could he treat her that way? Then, I got an idea.

I approached the family again, but instead of taking Golden Boy or Cupid with me, I indicated I wanted to take Mr BMW. He made lame excuses to the ladies why he didn't want to go with me, but soon the ladies egged me on to take him – it meant more time chatting at

the hamburger joint. I took him by the hand and bounced up the path, dodging oncoming troll traffic and startling my colleagues by going the wrong way with an adult.

I wanted to get to the hoop spot, and was glad to see it was empty. I led mr BMW into the throw marker, and pushed him back a few feet, after all, he was an adult. He was very accommodating and let me position him. I knocked his legs open with little kicks, then set him up in a posture worthy of Magic Johnson, the ball above his head, knees bent a little, head back, and ball loaded above his head. I stood in front of him, and finalized the position of the shoulders.

And then, with a swift move of the knee, I kicked him in the balls.

His expression was priceless. Actually, it was a rapid succession of two distinct faces: one of disbelief and surprise at being attacked by a troll, and a second one of intense pain known only to male members of each species. My kick lifted his feet off the ground, and as I watched in slo-mo, he fell back, dropped the ball, and put his hands to his crotch.

I kneeled by him and hissed through the character mouth. "Listen, bastard, I've seen how you treat that little girl. She's more precious than a lowlife scumsucking money machine like you could ever be. You better change your ways. Make no mistake about this, she has my card, and if I ever get an email saying you bent a hair on her head, your wife will know. I bet she has sharper knees than I do. Understand?"

I knew it was an empty threat if there ever was one, but I figured that a guy is not in a strong position to negotiate, if his testicles are still on the way home from meeting his tonsils.

I heard a faint reply as he struggled to get back into breathing mode. "Deal," he said. I patted his shoulder, and took out my card. I showed it to him. "She's got one of these, and the website is open twenty-four seven, a fucking 365 days a year. So you play safe, okay?" And I tucked the card into the breast pocket of his way-too-loud Hawaiian shirt. Then I went to the cache.

After a moment, I picked him up from the ground, dusted his clothes a bit and escorted him to the family. With a grand gesture, I took out an ice cream coupon and put it in his palm. He smiled feebly and walked to the hamburger joint, knock-kneed. I patted Golden Boy and Cupid on their heads, and gave a hug to Princess. Then I produced another diary from inside my leather jacket and gave it to her, and was relieved to see the sparkle in her eyes return. I honked once, and left.

I went back to my vantage point by the parking lot. A while later, I saw the BMW-Lexus party getting in their cars. Princess waved to me with both hands, and I honked her a greeting. Mr BMW looked at me only when he had loaded the car, and I dusted my knee. He got in and drove away.

All in a day's work.