



Little Miss Joshua Tree publication date: Apr 30, 2008

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[Previous](#) | [Next](#)

I was nursing a battered heart. A difficult break up with a girlfriend had led me to spend a month camping and climbing at Joshua Tree National Park in Eastern California. A community of rascals and rock climbers lived in a beautiful landscape with golden granite spires surrounded by desert flowers and cacti. The sun shined everyday and the faces around the campfires told ribald tales of hazard and peril.

One evening I was invited to a party which was to be enlivened by a intriguingly titled Miss Joshua Tree contest. I got a lift from strangers with a pickup truck and we drove deeper into the desert for what seemed to be a very long time. In the darkness we arrived at a remote ranch.

I was a little surprised by the disproportionate number of men at this party. Living in Joshua Tree had deprived me of female company. However I assumed that a beauty contest in the desert would perhaps attract more men than women.

Partaking of the cowboy hospitality on offer I began to drink myself into a relaxed and sociable mood and soon the start of the Miss Joshua Tree contest was announced. The men were told to dress themselves and we were taken to a room where a large pile of women's clothing lay on the floor. It became apparent that the beauty contest wasn't quite what I had been expecting. I also realised I was fully expected to embrace the spirit of the evening and wear a dress.

I feel myself to be reasonably open-minded and crucially I felt it would be unwise to offend my hosts. So I squeezed my skinny English body into the least revealing dress and paraded myself along with the other contestants on the makeshift catwalk. I even became a little disappointed that I didn't win.

The party continued and the strangers who had driven me here announced their imminent departure. In a state of heightened conviviality I decided to stay while guests continued to leave.

And then in the early hours there came upon me a strange and troubling revelation and instantly and vividly I became aware of my surroundings. I fully understood the true strangeness of my situation. Not a soul in the world knew where I was. The only people still left in the house were men wearing ladies clothing.

Men in pretty dresses stood over me. One played a banjo, the others sung cowboy ballads that John Wayne most definitely would not have appreciated.

I was all alone in a dark American desert in the company of lonely cowboys in drag.

 [Previous](#) | [Next](#)

 [Back to top](#)