

# Mirage in the Desert



In the above photo, the blue on the sand is not a small body of water. It is a mirage, a “false image.” One would like it to be water if one had been in the desert for a long time and feels extremely hot. “Oh honey, whatever scorched you up is creating an illusion. It’s a *mirage*.” One may feel murderous of the speaker of such a comment to one’s clear vision. One may feel suicidal when one finds out that the speaker was indeed correct.

I have been walking in the desert for a long time. The desert of aloneness where intimate, tender, familiar, and comforting human touch has become like an oasis, a vague reverie, a myth. When I began to accept that dry sand is my sole companion, I saw something blurry from a far. Can that be *water*?

I met Juliana Oliveira in the evening of 16 July 2020 when she was showing her work, “Guardian,” at Tanzfabrik Wedding, as a part of “Down to Earth” research lab. There were many potted trees in the work and each audience member could take home the trees of their choice. I chose two chestnut trees planted in one pot, because “they can only procreate when they are together.” The trees looked visibly unwell – they were merely two

long thin branches that resembled antennas and the few leaves at the top were brown and crunchy. I liked how alien they looked. Later, I went up to Juliana and said that my trees look sick. “They are,” she replied. She explained that there is a specific type of bacteria that lives only on this breed of chestnut tree; the bacteria eat the leaves and kill them. “These trees aren’t planted so often in cities anymore because there’s no solution to their health problem,” Juliana said. She said that I could give them a chance to live. “I have a cat!”, I blurted out. “The trees are very resilient,” she replied, as she ran her fingers up and down one of the trees. During our conversation, she was sitting quite close to me and laid one of her hands on the pot, where I had also placed my hands. As I saw the big word, “Abstand” (Distance), displayed on the board of the Ufer Studios behind her, I hesitated if I should scoot back to create some distance between us. However, I decided to indulge in this sensation of odd intimacy with a charming stranger.

Juliana gave her phone number to every audience who took a plant, because she wanted to receive updates about the trees’ lives. With her hand-written phone number on a yellow post-it note tacked on my pot, I headed out. Juliana waved enthusiastically as I disappeared out of her sight. Her kindness filled me with rushing commitment to revive the crunchy trees.

Within ten minutes of arriving home, my cat snapped a branch of one of the trees. Devastated, I immediately sent Juliana the following texts:



“my cat already did a terrible thing :(  
oh NO  
should I just take off the broken part  
or re-tape?”



“for now... :(“



Juliana answered right away: “Hello... what’s your name?” “Don’t worry” I asked if the taping technique was a good idea. She told me to do a clean diagonal cut. Until this point, I was purely worried just about the trees’ wellness. I did not want them to die already. Then, something wonderful entered my phone. Juliana sent me the following photo, with a caption “Diagonal.”



This, I believe, was when I started seeing the mirage slowly gathering. First of all, what a beautiful photo! Secondly, how bold to send a selfie to a stranger! Am I allowed to enjoy this mysterious feeling of flirtation for a moment?

I carried out the diagonal cut instruction and made a “small third tree” by poking in the cut-off branch into the soil.

I sent the photo to Juliana.  
She replied: “You are very funny.”

I sent some cat photos and we chatted a bit. Then, it was over.



The night after, I met up with some friends. A beautiful person (whom I will call ‘O’) who I don’t know well was there with her boyfriend. The whole night I was trying my best not to so obviously fixate my gaze on her, although I was quietly fascinated by the way she did everything and anything. At one point, we sat down for drinks and she sat directly across from me. I remember feeling increasingly tortured by witnessing her clumsy yet enchanting ways, and gradually the intensity of my feelings was becoming difficult to bear. I was struggling to act rationally about *knowing* that the mirage is just a mirage. I told myself, ‘Remember. It will never turn into real water. It’s a MIRAGE.’

Luckily, at the apex of my inner battle, we were asked to move our seats to inside. At that moment, someone mentioned that O was excellent at giving dating advice. I decided to take the chance and asked her if I could get a consultation. Inside, we sat side by side and I explained about the interaction between Juliana and I. Asking a mirage if what I am seeing is a mirage. Why not try it out? I asked her if she thinks this interaction could be read as a kind of flirtation? When I showed her the selfie, she

exclaimed how beautiful Juliana was. She sat for some seconds in silence, looked at me, blinked, and said: “I think you should ask her out!” I was shocked by this suggestion because this was a thought that *never* crossed my mind. Flustered, I asked, *how*? I explained how untalented I am in these things. Once, I wanted to ask someone out and had to ask a friend for a line – “Wanna hang out sometime?” – and practice it over and over again. At the end, I was too shy and couldn’t say it to the person.

The line O suggested was, “It was nice meeting you yesterday. Would you like to take a walk with me?” We practiced it in both English and German. I thought I would try texting this to Juliana the day after, since I have nothing to lose in the desert anyway. The dry wind shaves away shame over time and I become one with the wind. When I arrived home late that night, however, all my trainings vanished into thin air as soon as I saw:

My cat is a monster.

Distressed,  
I sent Juliana the photo and  
explained what had happened.





I wrote:  
“reproducing trees... :(”

The next morning, Juliana wrote back and I became certain that our interaction hadn't been flirtatious at all. I felt fine with that. I moved the trees to the kitchen, hoping it would be more cat-safe. Later, my friend asked if I had texted Juliana to ask her out for a walk. I said that I hadn't and that the whole conversation with O about it was just an excuse to talk to her. After that, I have neither spoken with nor seen Juliana nor O. I thought I had walked past the mirages and I had become one with the desert.

But not quite. The greatest mirage was yet to come. It happened out of nowhere in the following week, Wednesday evening, to be exact. I met up with someone I've met in a German class last summer (whom I will call 'Q'). Since the class, we've been in touch from time to time and would see each other every few month. I've always thought she was very cute. We were catching up in a park and then suddenly we were making out. The transition in between was a blur. It was still bright out and we went to my friend's birthday gathering in a private courtyard. There, we danced and kissed. It was dark by now, and we headed home since we both had commitments early the next day. When we were to part, Q dropped her bicycle on top of the other parked ones and it made a dramatic clashing sound. I was startled and looked at her bicycle, but her eyes were fixated on mine. We kissed. Then, she said, “I think I need some time.” “You need



time. OK, I can wait,” I murmured. “But you can still write me. Maybe we do something this weekend,” she said. “OK,” I answered. We kissed some more and went our own ways.

My desire for Q was enormous. I felt ready for her in every way. I was ready for her to be in my life in all intimate ways. Slowly, however, I realised that the experience with her had been another mirage, which felt so real that my illusion turned into hope for something *real*. When I bent down to drink the water, it disappeared.

Q and I texted sparsely on the following days, and I asked if we should meet sometime on the weekend. By Friday evening, I felt desperate about Q not writing me. My friend advised me to occupy myself and live on with my own life, although it’s the *worst* to be waiting for a text.

While I waited, the top tips of the “small trees” were being chewed up by the monster. I had given up on continuing with the “clean diagonal cut”, since this would most likely shorten down the trees until they are almost non-existing.



On Saturday night, Q sent me a loud and hectic voice message saying that we could meet on Sunday or sometime during the next week for sure. I replied by saying that I was open to meet on Sunday.

On Sunday morning, I noticed the green arms sprouting from the bottom of a small tree. I felt hope.



Sunday passed and I heard nothing from Q.

The whole week, I heard nothing from Q. On Thursday, I poked her with a text. She replied lightly, but without any sign of meeting up.

Friend 1 advised: "This sounds bad and you should let go of this desire."

Friend 2 advised: "Move on."

As soon as I felt hope, it was broken. I gasped in disbelief.



On Friday, I felt courageous. Although my friends advised me to move on quietly to keep my dignity, I felt unafraid to be vulnerable. I carried out my last clean diagonal cut and sent Q the following text:



"Hello. Hope you've been snatching the summer before it goes by. I've been trying to respect the time you said you needed ( and give you s p a c e ) but waiting has sometimes been a difficult weight for me. If you found any clarity since the last time we met (for example: you don't want us to meet again, or you want us to just be friends, or...), it'd be very kind if you can share it with me. It would help me to lift off this vague weight of waiting, wondering, trying not to wait, etc. I wished to ask in person but wasn't sure when we'd meet again, so... here it is :) Wish you a nice summer day! "

To my surprise, Q replied on the same day with a long voice message. It was consisted heavily of “I don’t know” and “I’m not sure.” It ended with her suggesting that we meet this Sunday to talk in person. Sunday rolled in and I asked if we would meet. Q replied once again in her elusive manner by saying that she wasn’t sure and why don’t we see how the week unfolds. With this, my mirage lifted completely. It was gone without a trace and I stood in the desert. I am the desert. I am the desert. I am the desert. The desert is vast and beautiful. I am vast and beautiful.

When I asked Juliana about writing something springing from experiencing her work, she explained more about her process and intentions. She wrote, “I was interested not only in passing on the responsibility to care, but more in passing on all the questions which pop up. It is about the “If” and the “How.” How to care? How to not care?”

How to care and not care at the same time? After gathering energy for a couple of days, I sent a reply to Q because I didn’t want to disappear. I shared my feelings transparently by saying that I liked her very much and I felt ready and excited to get to know her in many different ways – to appreciate and find joy in that process. I also shared that I found her ways of communication elusive, difficult, and even unkind. I cared for myself in feeling and expressing my inner landscape. I cared for Q in communicating clearly and as gently as I could. I could express myself because I did not care for certain things – to be vulnerable, to reach out, and to maybe damage my pride in the process. Q did not reply. Sometimes, when I’ve forgotten about the mirage, she would drop me a message, which has been an amusing surprise every time.

The green arms were quickly growing.  
I felt hope.  
I care about the trees.  
I also care about my cat,  
who enjoys eating the greens.  
Many mornings,  
I wake up to my cat shattering a pot of plant.  
Many evenings,  
I come home to a pot shattered on the floor.





After trying all the methods to keep her away from the plants and seeing that nothing works, I simply clean up the mess and re-pot them again and again.

I move the plants around in the house.

Sometimes, I let my cat eat the flowers.

It could seem that the plants and the cat are two opposing elements that cannot quite coexist – however, if I let go of each thing being in a “perfect” state, they can coexist.

This could mean not caring so much about – or letting go of – some things, in order to maintain care for the things I choose to care.

This playful and attentive juggling is the art of caring.

