

Treetop

by

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DESCRIPTION

Julia Jackson Sequoia Sempervirens, a redwood tree-sitter for two years, is coming close to a resolution with the company that will result in the redwood being saved from logging.

CHARACTERS

- Julia Jackson Sequoia Sempervirens, political activist
- Zach Reising ["rising"], former logger, now company "spokesperson"—old enough to be her father

NOTE: Ethnicity is not crucial, and accents should be distinct, not bland, news-anchor voices.

SETTING

- An ancient redwood, somewhere north of San Francisco

PROPS

Two step-ladders of at least 8' height: the higher, the better. (The best would be two tall A-frames of the kind used to focus lights.) If only shorter ladders can be used, then ZACH's "climbing" needs to be done in some way to indicate that he is climbing 180 feet above the ground. Just below Julia's "platform" would be a series of cleats nailed into the tree as a ladder up to the platform—the steps of the ladder can be seen as these cleats. The director should play with the placement of the ladders to find a combination that works. If the director has some other ideas about how to achieve the climbing effect, he or she should feel free to use them. (For instance, it might be sufficient to have ZACH simply stand to one side in his own light until he needs to be at the foot of the ladders.)

A cell phone for JULIA (either working or with a ringing done on tape). It would be good to have a "flip" kind, where the mouthpiece/earpiece flips open and closed.

An intercom device for ZACH so that he can speak to people on the ground. There needs to be a sound effect of static and voices as they try to contact him.

A large knife. Attached to the ladder.

Small bucket filled with water colored yellow, for urine—quarter cup in all. Attached to the ladder.

Clothing, logger equipment, etc. as appropriate to the scene—but JULIA’s clothing can be mismatched, since she has been sitting up in the tree for two years. (Note on climbing equipment: it would be impractical to use actual climbing equipment of heavy spikes clamped to heavy boots, axes, leather belts, ropes, and cables. But some equipment could be used to suggest—telephone companies have a lesser version of it for climbing utility poles. And if the illusion of equipment can be done, rather than the actual thing, then that choice can be made as well.)

JULIA is also tied in to the tree—a leather belt with clips and a thick heavy rope would do. It does not have to support her weight at any time but must be free to move.

* * * * *

In the darkness, wind through tree branches and other sounds to establish mood. These continue very softly under the action during the play. Lights come up slowly, as if at dawn, to reveal JULIA, sitting on one of the ladders. She looks, for the moment, completely at peace. In the dawn light enters ZACH, equipped for his climb. As ZACH begins, JULIA’s cell phone chirps several times before she takes it out of her pocket, puts it to her ear, and speaks.

JULIA

Yes, Jessie.

JULIA listens but does not engage in a dialogue. After a second or two she climbs partway down the ladder and sees ZACH.

JULIA

(into the phone)

Yes, he’s there. Wait.

(to ZACH)

Hey!

ZACH looks up; they catch eyes; he salutes her and responds.

ZACH

Hey!

JULIA

Who in the hell are you?

ZACH

My name is—

JULIA
What are you doing?

ZACH
I've got something to tell—

JULIA
Shut up!

JULIA retreats up the ladder.

JULIA
The Visigoths are attacking Eden, Jessie. No—you listen! No!
None of it—not any of it! Turning you off, Jessie.

JULIA holds the phone at arm's length and makes an elaborate gesture of turning off the phone.

JULIA
No. More. Lies.

JULIA sits for a moment, thinking—the sounds in the background can still be heard. She then carefully sneaks down the ladder and “peeks” to see ZACH again.

JULIA
Damn! Time is being lost.

JULIA goes to replace the cell phone in her pocket, but it slips and falls—ZACH moves as if to indicate that it just missed him. During the next lines, the actors will need to talk as if there is still some 45' feet between them, but the volume is reduced as ZACH gets closer.

ZACH
Hey!

JULIA
Damn!

ZACH
What was that?

JULIA
Cell phone.

Artillery? ZACH

It just fell. JULIA

Fifty feet of cell phone is a mighty weapon. ZACH

What are you doing here? JULIA

Too damned small anyway. ZACH
(to himself, as he adjusts)

What do you want? JULIA

Rotary's fine. ZACH
(to himself)

Just. Go. Back! JULIA

Can't. ZACH

Are you alone? JULIA

Yes. ZACH

How do I know that? JULIA

Just look. ZACH

JULIA goes pivots on the top of the ladder, checking out all sides.

ZACH

Satisfied?

JULIA

You should be so lucky. So you're alone—big deal. Makes it easier to go back alone.

ZACH

I have news for you.

JULIA

You and it are not wanted up here.

ZACH

I know.

JULIA

You don't deserve—none of you deserve—

ZACH

I know.

JULIA

But still you're coming up!

ZACH

Yes I am.

JULIA

I can see you.

ZACH

I can see you, too.

JULIA

The eyes of the world are stuck on us.

ZACH

We are naked to the world one hundred and eighty feet above the earth. Damn these crampons!

JULIA
So you can't do anything dastardly—

ZACH
(surprised by the “old-fashioned” word)
Dastardly?

JULIA
—to me—

ZACH
—at this height?

JULIA
—or to Eden—Not to Eden or to any of us!

ZACH
Where did you get “dastardly”?

JULIA
It's all dastardly—all of everything you all are doing. Just because
you're some bloated multi-corporational Frankenfreak lumber
company you think—

ZACH
I've read the manifesto.

JULIA
Don't mock me!

ZACH
I'm not—I just said I read the manif[esto]—

JULIA
All that—raping! Get those big chainsaws humming, hold 'em right
against your big old bulgy guts—

*JULIA mimes holding a big chainsaw as if it were an oversized penis, makes a roaring sound.
ZACH should now be at the foot of the ladders.*

JULIA
Rrrrrrrrrrrrr! Rrrrrrrrrrrrr! Well, no more! No more! Hey! Hey!

What? ZACH

Hey! JULIA

What? ZACH

JULIA
You stop right there. Right there! I know what you're up to.

I'm just about up to you. ZACH

Stop it, smart-mouth! JULIA

Okay— ZACH

JULIA
Or I will piss on your head! Look! Look!

JULIA gets the bucket.

JULIA
I got a pot to piss in and its aching for gravity.

At this moment, ZACH's intercom comes on, with a mix of static and voices—unintelligible. For a few seconds its blare fills the air as ZACH and JULIA listen. ZACH does not respond.

You said you were alone. JULIA

I am. ZACH

You're recording us! JULIA

ZACH
It's just—

JULIA
You vandals always lie.

ZACH
I am alone! This I can turn off if you want.

JULIA
What I want? This is what I want—piss off!

JULIA empties the bucket out. The contents just miss ZACH.

ZACH
Hey!

JULIA
Damn!
(shakes the bucket, re-attaches it)
Damn! Damn, damn, damn, damn! Should have drunk more water. Make a note. I said stop!

ZACH
I am stopped, Julia. I—await.

Beat, in silence. The static and voices comes up again. This time, ZACH claps a hand on the intercom to shut it off. Then, with very visible and deliberate gestures, he detaches the unit and “drops” it to the ground, following the cell phone.

ZACH
Now, Julia, no one else is sitting at our table. I have something to tell you, Julia. That cell phone call of yours was about letting you k[now]—

JULIA
You have either good news or bad news, and I don't want to hear either.

ZACH
Julia Jackson Sequoia Sempervirens—I can understand that.

JULIA
(astonished)

You used my whole name.

ZACH settles himself against the ladder, now on the cleats of the “ladder” up to the platform.

ZACH

Well, it’s your name, isn’t it? You took the name of the tree as your own, right?

JULIA

In solidarity.

ZACH

And since I am on an “ambassadorial” mission, it’s only etiquette that when I present my bona fides, I should call my diplomatic dance partner by her proper name. We are in a dance, you know? And now, Julia Jackson Sequoia Sempervirens, I, Zach Reising, have to deliver—

Suddenly, JULIA comes down the ladder fiercely and tries to kick ZACH.

JULIA

I told you I don’t want you to tell me anything!

ZACH

Hey—stop—

ZACH manages to grab her foot, and for a moment they square off at each other.

ZACH

Don’t be stupid!

JULIA

I didn’t ask you to invade!

ZACH

You don’t want to kill me.

JULIA

I just want you to leave us alone.

ZACH

You and Eden.

JULIA

I just want you to stop hissing, hissing, in my ear.
(trying to shake her foot free)
Yes—me and Eden.

ZACH

Eden.

ZACH lets her foot go; JULIA retreats.

JULIA

From the first day her name.

ZACH

I know.

JULIA

And I don't need any "Adam" up here!

ZACH

You're an "Adam" smasher, to be sure.

JULIA

It's been enough for me just to be here. It's sacred.

ZACH

That's what you've said.

JULIA

You work for them—how can you know what I've said?

ZACH

You cross a border, you do your research. I've read up on you.
I've listened to you.

JULIA

And that makes you what?

ZACH

May I stand unmolested on the bottom rung, here? It's been a long time since I've hung by the belt this far above the noise.

JULIA
(stamps her foot)

But no closer!

ZACH stands on the "rung."

ZACH

Creak, crack. Unhitch the back.

Several beats as ZACH looks out over the "forest."

ZACH

It has been too long—

JULIA

That's far enough.

ZACH

No farther, Julia, I promise.

(back out to the "forest")

I have—forgotten.

JULIA

Forgotten what?

ZACH

Unearthly.

(to JULIA)

Yes. This, Julia, this—this! I have forgotten—to my great loss. You see this every day.

JULIA

I see this every day.

ZACH

You are very lucky.

ZACH takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

ZACH

It has been too long. I always understood, you know. Why you would give up so much of life down there for life up here.

JULIA

(uneasy)

I don't think you understand at all.

ZACH

It's important for you to think like that, yes.

JULIA

Like what?

ZACH

That you can't be understood by someone like me—

JULIA

Well—you're the enemy. You probably just want to know if I have sex up here with myself!

ZACH

Down there, maybe they want to know—gossips—but that's because they have never been up here. This is better than sex. Where the air—words. Either you know it or you don't. You know it. I know it. Sex—I'll tell you, Julia, and I'd tell them down there if they'd understand—this is sex, if you mean union, ecstasy—you know, lifted out. Sex down there—pale, huh? A pale imitation, hey?

JULIA

I wouldn't know—down there—

ZACH

But up here, you know, don't you? Sex! You're funny—this is so beyond that.

JULIA

Yes.

ZACH

Beyond politics, economics—

JULIA
Yes.

ZACH
—beyond what the ants consider important.

JULIA
Yes. Lifted in a leap of light.

ZACH
Yes.

JULIA
As beautiful as a cornerstone.

ZACH
Yes.

JULIA
Healed.

ZACH
Healed.

JULIA
It is—home.

Beat as JULIA looks at him, unsure.

JULIA
(harshly)
Who are you, corporate flack, Reising, Zach?

ZACH
That's one way of putting my name.

JULIA
You said you read about me.

ZACH
I have.

JULIA

And Eden.

ZACH

And Eden, too. And everything else about you, your group, your cause—your poetry. The ones you float down on parachutes.

JULIA

Stop smiling!

ZACH

Why?

JULIA

I know that smile—soothe-smooth-it-over smile.

ZACH

Just appreciation. May I come up another step?

JULIA rushes back down the ladder and threatens to kick ZACH again.

JULIA

No you may not, Zach flack!

JULIA, balanced against the ladder, drops her pants and squats slightly as if she is going to go on his head. ZACH, of course, ducks. A few grunts, but nothing. Frustrated, JULIA pulls up her pants and goes back to the top of the ladder.

ZACH

I'll stay right here, then.

JULIA

You will stay right there!

ZACH

Right here.

JULIA

I don't have to keep any pepper spray or mace crap up here—

ZACH

I won't move.

JULIA

—because there are no liars! Nothing ever attacks! Well, except for the company helicopter trying to blow me out of the tree—Oh, and the floodlights, the sirens, the police attacking my crew—

ZACH

That all happened, yes.

JULIA

But mostly without the humans it's safe up here.

ZACH

The storms?

JULIA

No revenge in them, no meanness. Not like human storms. With Eden, it is always safe. Was. Safe.

ZACH

I am not here to hurt you.

JULIA

Yes. You are.

ZACH

You know why.

JULIA

No—I refuse.

ZACH

You know why I've climbed up here.

JULIA

Tell me nothing! Tell me nothing!

ZACH

It's over—

JULIA

“In the treetop—”

ZACH

The deal has been struck—

JULIA

Tell me nooottthhhiiiiinnnggg, Zach flack!

ZACH

It is time—

JULIA

Noooooottthhhiiiiinnngggg!

Several beats.

ZACH

You got what you w[anted]—

JULIA covers her ears or make some kind of similar gesture. Her body language is increasingly anxious.

ZACH

(changing tack)

Like floating on an ocean—an ocean. Isn't it? An ocean. This ship. One of those figureheads on the bow. You used that in one of your poems. "Being on top of this slow geyser of wood." I liked that one, too.

JULIA

Shut up!

ZACH

You've been up here for two years and eight days—

JULIA

Shut up, shut up—

ZACH

I did this for 20 years.

JULIA

Killing trees.

ZACH

That I did, Julia.

JULIA

Butchery—chainsaw, bow saw—

ZACH

Every method.

JULIA

And now you hack for the masters.

ZACH

I saw too many thin get crushed—

(holds up his hands)

—every bone, at least once—too many widow-makers, too many
slivers and slack times. Took myself to school, put on a white
collar, used elevators rather than crampons.

JULIA

Zach rising up to the middle class.

ZACH

(jokingly)

And now I “are” a spokesperson—and now I need to
“spokesperson” with you. We don’t have much time—and it’s time.

JULIA

Tell. Me. Nothing.

*ZACH goes up a step, but before he knows it, JULIA is down the ladder with her foot on his
throat, leaning him far back. It should be staged so that it appears ZACH is barely holding on.*

ZACH

(barely able to talk)

You’re crushing—

JULIA

Shut up, mouthpiece, shut up, shut up, shut up!

ZACH

I can’t hold—

JULIA
I won't let you!

ZACH
You're killing me—killing me—

JULIA realizes that ZACH is right—she could kill him—and immediately releases him. ZACH clings to the “tree,” gasping for breath. JULIA retreats, frightened at what she just did.

JULIA
Go, go—I'll come down—I'll come down, I'll come down—it's not safe any more—

ZACH
(hoarsely but without rancor)
Shut up—

JULIA
Go—
(to herself)
—not safe, not safe—

ZACH
Listen—

JULIA gets the knife. She starts to hack at the rope around her waist.

JULIA
Go—I'll come down—right away—

JULIA can ad lib other phrases until ZACH stops her.

Seeing what she is doing, ZACH climbs up the ladder and grabs her hand.

ZACH
Stop it. You haven't done anything wrong.

JULIA stops but does not give up the knife—there is a moment of tableau with ZACH holding JULIA's wrist, the knife suspended, JULIA not looking at ZACH. Then slowly ZACH pries her fingers off the knife, one by one, until he holds the knife. When he takes the last finger off and has the knife in his hand, JULIA gives him a horrified look. Another moment of tableau, then they separate. ZACH looks around and sees where the knife was kept; he replaces it.

ZACH

(massaging his neck and throat)

The deal is this, Julia. Julia. Eden is saved—and everything within 200 feet of here. You got yourself an acre, more or less, of saved ancient redwoods. Other parts of the deal you wanted—you got.

JULIA

(not facing ZACH)

Could have killed you. You.

ZACH

Your group agreed—

JULIA

Killed you, Zack flack—

ZACH

Yes, yes—but down there your group said they didn't want to speak for you—that was probably the cell call—listen to me! They said only you could give the “yes”—it was your ass up here, they said—which is true, I have seen that to confess it—

JULIA

(facing him directly)

I never knew—never thought—

ZACH

I take it we have a “yes.”

JULIA

I feel—ashamed. I am ashamed.

ZACH

Do you know why I am up here—why Zach corporate rising flack clumb 180 feet above his natural position on the earth? Any idea, Julia?

JULIA shakes her head no.

ZACH

My handlers thought it would be a great PR move to have this crusty veteran deliver the news to the flannel fanatic poetic anarchist—and when we both climbed down, there would be the

press to record the fall of the wall, the rapprochement. Yes, the trucks and everything and everybody are waiting. Personally—stupid. Clumsy. No one will ever believe it. But I didn't tell them this—zipped my lips—because I had my own reasons for agreeing. Actually, two. Now you say, "What are they?"

JULIA

What are they?

ZACH

I wanted one more time up here before I was cubicled forever. And I wanted to meet you. I wanted to meet the "enemy." I wanted to meet the enemy who was doing something I admired and never had the smarts to do myself.

JULIA

Admired? You're Zack the Hack.

ZACH

Zach the Hack not toeing the company line. You had your very own mole on the inside.

JULIA

My very own mole.

ZACH

You're quite a hero, you know—heroine?

JULIA

I don't always know—

ZACH

Doesn't your crew tell you? I know you've given interviews. Your parachute poems are everywhere.

JULIA

I don't always—listen. Zach. I lose batteries—sometimes on purpose.

ZACH

And cell phones.

JULIA

It drives them crazy. For days—I think it’s “for days” because I forget to remind myself about time, watches—I lose my—place. Everything just kind of—fizzes away. I stop being—I stop being ego, ego, ego—and it’s nice. Ocean.

ZACH

Ocean. Yes. If I had a daughter—I don’t, but if I did—I would hope she’d do something like this. That I had taught her well enough. This moment is not without some irony.

JULIA

The universe’s high octane fuel.

ZACH

There’s more than you think. You got what you wanted—but because the Corporation doesn’t need it anymore. Deals within deals, Julia. The Corporation just signed an “agreement” with the government that gave it an “in” somewhere else on new uncut territory in return for Eden. Your “costs” became bearable. You’ve been filed away. That’s the inside poop. So.

JULIA

Can you forgive me?

ZACH

I hear—inside poop—that some of those pines in the new territory go for a hundred feet or more.

JULIA

Yeah?

ZACH

Yeah. Piece of cake, I would think. For a veteran.

JULIA

Piece “oh” cake.

ZACH

Then—then there would be forgiveness.

JULIA

And light.

ZACH

And light.

JULIA

Okay. Okay.

JULIA and ZACH sit there, transfixed by the forest, as the lights fade to black and the sound of the wind comes up, then out.