

The Tree Frog, the Toad and the Chameleon



*A Purple
Parable of our
Times*



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A Purple Parable for Our Times

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Episode 1: Prelude

Once upon a time, there was a garden. Some said it was the most beautiful garden the world had ever seen. It had lakes and hills, trees and flowers and abundant resources for a wonderfully diverse population of garden creatures who had learned how to work together to make the garden better for all of them. Getting along was not always easy, and mistakes were made, but their efforts slowly but surely contributed to making the garden a more perfect place. The garden was governed as a democracy—a republic really, given the structures and controls that earlier generations had imposed against mob rule.

While many different creatures lived in the garden, the tree frogs were the elite among the garden's myriad animals—or so the tree frogs believed. Most of them came from important families and attended elite schools. They were the intellectuals, the creatives, the professors and the upper strata of garden society. They could jump farther than the other creatures even dreamed of, an important skill for both physical and political survival. The tree frogs had outsize influence in the politics of the garden.

Most of the tree frogs lived in trees around the biggest lake. The most important lived in a huge Live Oak that the tree frogs called the Tree of Power, but most creatures just called the Great Tree.

Many years ago, a good-looking tree frog named Joey grew up in the garden. He was a popular frog who liked politics and became one of the youngest frogs to serve in the garden's Grand Convocation, which passed rules to manage the garden. Joey had an innate sense of what his constituents wanted to hear. He always seemed to know where he should be in the Great Tree to win over the other garden creatures. When the winds of change were blowing across the garden, Joey would spring across the Great Tree to be where the wind was blowing.

Joey was a member of the Blue Party. After many years of representing the other creatures in the Convocation, he was asked to be vice president for a new, younger tree frog named Barac (pronounced *Barrrock!* after a famous frog call). With Joey at his side, Barac would

become the first African tree frog ever elected president of the garden. Barac and Joey served two terms together.

As Joey aged, the other creatures began calling him Uncle Joey. Although he wanted to run for president when Barac's term was up, Barac preferred an older female frog named Hil, who had been an important officer in Barac's cabinet and was married to a former president of the garden. So, Uncle Joey didn't run.

Everyone thought Hil would become the first female president of the garden. But she lost! To the surprise of most of the creatures, a Red Party toad called Big Donnie eked out a victory in a very close election.

The Blue Party supporters could not believe it. They hated Big Donnie. The tree frogs who lived in the far-left branches of the Great Tree and their friends in the media (all Blue Party ravens, according to the Red Party supporters) especially despised him. They had done everything possible to defeat him, even spreading rumors that he was working with bad creatures from other gardens to get elected. All these naysayers thought Big Donnie was a crude, rich, dishonest, egotistical bully who did not deserve to be president. He sat around croaking and calling the other frogs names. Worst of all, he was not one of them. He was a toad! He could barely waddle, much less soar like a tree frog. He didn't live in the Great Tree. He accused the media ravens of spreading fake news about him, yet constantly made up facts and superlatives about himself that could not withstand even a quick fact check.

Big Donnie and his Red Party followers had some media on their side too. Wolf News particularly irritated the Blue Party voters and their ravens who criticized it as hateful and dogmatic—an echo chamber for creatures who lived in the far-right branches of the Great Tree. Everyone knew Wolf had been created to give conservatives a media voice. It was staffed with falcons—fast, beautiful birds eager to attack their prey. Progressives and liberals had their own echo chamber media hosted by the most extreme ravens. The problem for the Red Party was that the garden's mainstream media—including the so-called newspapers of record—masqueraded as being objective when they actually tilted strongly toward progressive viewpoints and were staffed with media ravens.

Freedom of the press had been important to the garden's success since its earliest days. The garden's founders believed that freedom of speech was essential to any democracy because informed creatures would make better choices about their leaders. They expected the media (which consisted of newspapers back then) to provide the information and debate voters needed. Historically, the papers expressed their opinions on their editorial pages, and delivered the news, objectively, in their articles. Opinions were opinions and facts were facts.

When Big Donnie dared to run for president as an obnoxious toad, a rough political outsider who threatened the status quo, the elites and (according to the tree frogs and the media ravens) even democracy itself, media raven activists argued they had a moral duty to stop him. To do this, they had to be advocates, the activists said, and not merely reporters of the facts. When Big Donnie won the election over Hil—an event none of the media ravens thought remotely possible—the media ravens knew their activists were correct. Democracy and civilization (and elite power and influence) were at stake. Fairness and objectivity in reporting must give way to exposing and attacking anything and everything associated with Big Donnie, including his supporters, half of which Hil had called a “basket of deplorables.”

The Wolf News falcons and the other Red Party echo chambers were ready to return the favor.

Politics in the garden moved into a post-fact, post-truth world—an uncomfortable, dangerous place where objectivity and facts were replaced by subjectivity and opinions, where who said something was less important than whether it was true, and where each creature could have its own perception of the truth and “my truth” could trump yours.

Once Big Donnie was sworn in, the Blue Party politicians and the media ravens did everything they could to make it hard for Big Donnie to govern—a tactic that the Red Party politicians in the Grand Convocation had deployed against Barac years earlier. The ravens went further, publishing dozens of articles condemning Big Donnie’s character and warning he intended to become a dictator.

Despite all this and continuing denials from most of the media ravens, some of Big Donnie’s policies eventually gained some respect, at least from the Red Party members and more than a few independents. But the garden remained deeply divided.