

Michael Downs
an excerpt of a working draft

THE GAG RULE:
A DOCUMENTARY

The Neighbor:

Oh, yes. I liked Lila. Odd people make life so much more interesting.

I disagree. *Odd* is a fitting word. It's descriptive, not derogatory. Lila herself would agree. "Radical facts!" she used to say. So, *odd*, *outcast*. Those adjectives fit. We could describe Lila with any number of such words. *Prophet*? Maybe even that. Shouting truth from the city walls. "Whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak." Jeremiah, first chapter, seventh verse.

Twenty years as neighbors and acquaintances longer than that. We overlapped at Sweet Briar. Different sororities, though.

Twenty years. Longer even than Prof. Holba and I shared libraries.

That's literal. We did share libraries.

Yes, it can also be understood as a metaphor. I say too much. You make me blush. The point is that Lila was part of my life longer than anyone not related by blood. She was good to me. I tried to be good to her.

The Head of the University Committee on Legacy and Rehabilitation:

Before you ask anything, let me be clear: We did not want what happened to have happened. We did not want it to go so far. Let's not say Lila Godfrey deserved what

happened to her. No one deserves that. Let's say ... Look. She bore some responsibility. Not for what happened but for contributing to a culture in which such things *could* happen. There are some things, when said, that are outside the bounds. Maybe she was factually right in *some* ways, but she was wrong in others, and her prattling wasn't helpful. Did that warrant what happened? No, no. But the culture, again; she helped create that. And these were kids.

You know, don't you, that several doctoral students are right now lining up to make the whole thing the subject of dissertations? That's how messy and complicated it is.

No, not from our school. From other universities.

My field? What does my field have to do with this?

The Head of the Student Campus (re)Identity/fy Collective:

Did it start with me? With us?

I wish I remembered how it started.

You can say it started with us, if you want. I mean, you can say anything you want, it's a free country, who's going to stop you.

Okay, that's too flip. Like any woman should, I recognize that Lila Godfrey's story, situated from a particular stance, is about silencing a voice, denying a woman agency.

Though, remember: not everyone can talk at once. Some voices need to be quiet so others can speak. Lila Godfrey's voice is one people have been listening to for years—centuries, even.

That's metaphorical. I know how old she is.

I mean, white people. Lila didn't speak for women. She spoke for white people.

That's why I'd argue that Lila Godfrey's story—the one you're telling—is only a side story in a larger story about silencing voices and historical reckoning. Does that sound cruel, given everything that happened? Maybe. But consider all the other stories you've never ever heard, from anonymous voices long silenced—often by violence.

You could make a documentary about them, those people who were silenced. You could make a documentary about historical reckoning.

You could.

If you insist that Lila Godfrey's story is a story about free speech, I'll make this point: As an American, we're free to talk, but we're not free to be wrong. And, strictly speaking, we aren't even free to talk. The government can't stop your speech, but that doesn't mean you are free to say whatever you want whenever you want. Your employer can stop you. Your family can stop you. The church can stop you. A plantation owner could silence the enslaved person. The First Amendment pertains only to government silencing. Again, let me remind you of the historical context, of all those voices silenced: women, children, LGBTQ, BIPOC voices—quieted with the government's tacit approval. Because the First Amendment doesn't guarantee that you have a voice. It only precludes the government from silencing yours.

We didn't silence Lila Godfrey. In fact, wherever she is, she's still welcome to say her piece.

That sounds callous.

What happened at the end was awful. But, Ziggy.

Have you talked to Ziggy?

How it began? How what began? If you want to really know how it began, let's go back to our university's benefactor. Two-hundred whatever years ago. He owned people, claimed ownership. Anonymous people who never got to tell their stories. Yet his name is all over this university. On the chapel, on the Center for Animal Welfare, on the museum. Yes, his money founded the university. Blood money.

I don't want my degree associated with that history.

Lila Godfrey wanted to protect it. To protect him.
