

Ethel Rudkin: Preserving the Past

by Benjamin Peel

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Characters

HARSHA - A Ugandan Asian woman forced to leave with her family in the early 1970s. She is a student at Oxford University and staying with Ethel for part of a holiday between terms. Has sub continent India accent.

ETHEL - Ethel Rudkin early 80s, Lincolnshire folklore collector.

Setting

A room in Ethel Rudkin's house in 1974 when she lived in Toynton all Saints.

The interior of a room in ETHEL'S house in Toynton All Saints in 1974. A clock can be heard ticking and the last twenty seconds or so of a song called An Acre of Land plays on a mono tape recorder complete with hiss. ETHEL presses the stop button as it finishes. Or depending on music rights etc it could be ETHEL playing the last few bars of a a suitable sounding piece on a piano.

HARSHA: That is beautiful Ethel.

ETHEL: I collected that folk song in...oh it must be over fifteen years ago. Is there folk music where you are from?

HARSHA: Yes but it is very different though I think perhaps some themes are the same.

ETHEL: May I say that Harsha is a beautiful name and it means happiness?

HARSHA: Yes.

ETHEL: Then it suits you.

HARSHA: I am very happy to be here.

ETHEL: Would you like some more tea dear?

HARSHA: That would be most welcome.

ETHEL: A cup of tea makes everything seem better.

HARSHA: It does?

ETHEL pours them both some tea.

ETHEL: It's just a saying. What would you like to do during your stay with me?

HARSHA: I would like to know what you thought worth preserving and why especially with regards to folklore as I am very much interested in it.

ETHEL: Do you have a history of folklore in the country you are from? Before you came here I mean.

HARSHA: Yes, we have a rich oral tradition of tales, legends, stories, proverbs, and riddles.

ETHEL: It sounds pretty similar to Lincolnshire.

HARSHA: I was told that your interest is in finding connections between folklore, tradition, history and archaeology.

ETHEL: Well I collected anything that I thought was in danger of being lost to posterity. And not just objects but what is ephemeral too such as songs, plays, beliefs and local dialects.

HARSHA: From what I have seen so far just in this house alone it should all go to a museum for everyone to see.

ETHEL: A new museum in Lincoln opened about five years ago and I have donated a significant portion of my collection there.

HARSHA: Which is how it should all be cared for rather than somewhere like the British Musuem or the one in Oxford.

ETHEL: What do you mean by that?

HARSHA: Those museums hold many objects stolen from other countries including my own although I must now regard this as my country.

ETHEL: But they are well cared for at them and many people who would not otherwise get to see them can.

HARSHA: With the greatest of respect Ethel they were taken without consent from where they belong and there are museums in Africa.

ETHEL: As I understand it your old country is dangerously chaotic at the moment.

HARSHA: There have been problems in many countries as the British left but in the one I had to leave we had ties to this country which have rightfully been recognised.

ETHEL: Which it as it should be but lots of these objects were donated from private collections to British museums on condition they stay there.

HARSHA: (SHARP) That does not change the fact they were looted in the first place at times of great violence.

ETHEL: Yes that is true for some but not all of what was taken.

HARSHA: (SHARP) I would politely contend that much of what British museums have was taken illegally. (LESS SHARP) With your collection you are preserving the past so it will not be lost.

ETHEL: I am not saying that everything done in the name of the British Empire was glorious. Far from it but we can learn so much from the study of these objects.

HARSHA: That can be done in the country they belong to despite whatever other chaos may be going on.

ETHEL: Forgive me. I am an old woman nearing the end of my life. I am sure what you say is true and you perhaps think me old fashioned in my views.

HARSHA: I can see you have a passion for what you do which is to keep your history alive. I wish to study world folklore but I find it hard visiting museums here as much of what they have is linked to slavery and robbery.

ETHEL: I hope I have not offended you.

HARSHA: Not at all. It is good to be able to have a discussion without it becoming patronising and downright rude.

ETHEL: Then instead of teaching you I think I have learnt something of value.

HARSHA: You have taught me a valuable lesson too.

ETHEL: I have?

HARSHA: Yes. That everything seems better over a refreshing cup of tea. And I look forward to learning so much more from you.

ETHEL: Thank you.

HARSHA: I would very much like to hear that song again.

ETHEL: Of course.

*ETHEL presses rewind on the tape player for a few seconds and then presses play and the song plays from near the start. Or she plays the piano again. Fade out after about twenty seconds or so.
The End.*