

Elen lives in the post-apocalyptic megacity state Usatopia. It is a city-state populated by robots and artificial organisms including humans. The world has been ravaged by war and disease. Most of humanity no longer exists. This is the setting of her quest to find the key to her father's happiness.

Her Quest

by Frank Kyle

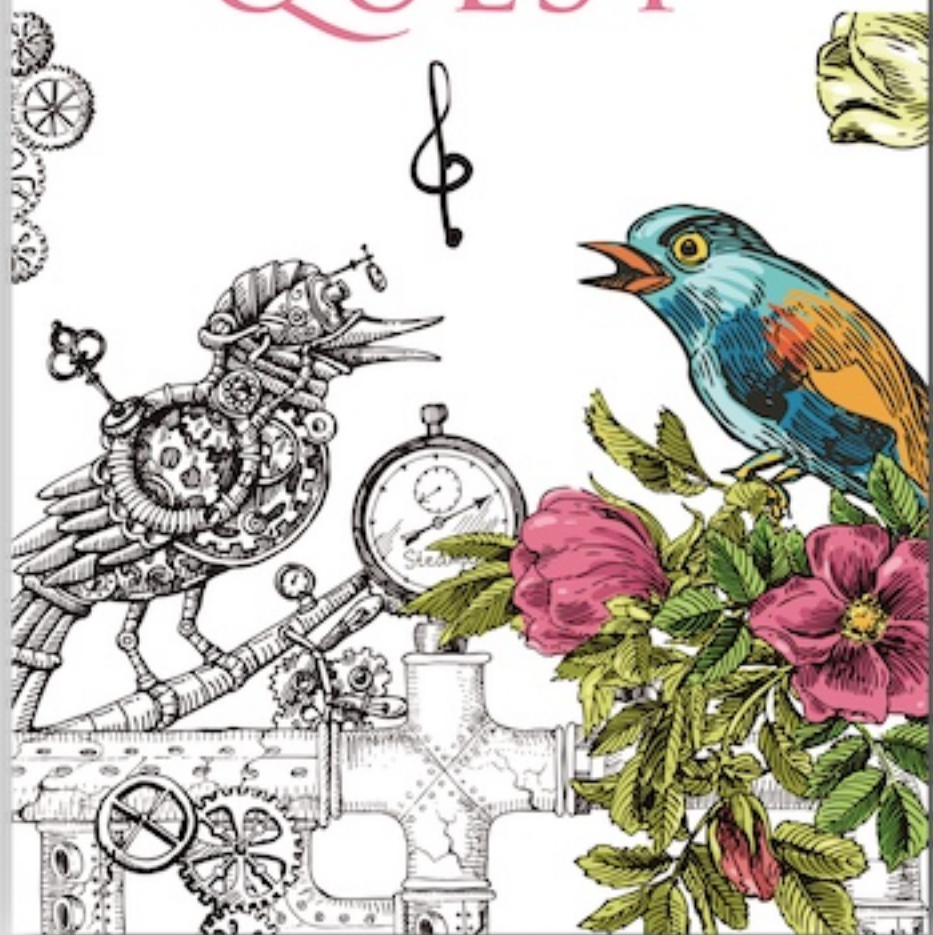
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FRANK KYLE

HER QUEST



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Contents

Dear Diary.....	1
The Great Mall.....	16
Peno	49
Gygos.....	103
Queer Girls.....	141
Thumpers.....	175
Nolovos	252
Bridge Women.....	311
Joe and Mildred.....	571
Cyclomads.....	591
Simpletons.....	653
Willow	675
John the Hermit.....	708
Computer	764
My Quest Ends.....	828

Dear Diary

Dear Diary,

It has been two years since Grandma died and I have not recorded a word, but now the time has come for me to start using you. I'm about to leave on a journey. I'm not sure where it will take me, but I don't wish to leave alone. So I'm taking you with me for company. As long as you're near I'll feel Grandma close by because you were her gift to me. Though I want to share my journey, I know Grandma will never hear what I record. Still, I need to pretend I'm talking to her sometimes or to an unknown listener, and not just to you, Diary. Sorry!

For the sake of my unknown listener I'll explain the circumstances that made me decide to embark on my journey.

One evening I found my father, who is the Chairman of Usatopia, pacing back and forth in front of the large fireplace, its mantle reaching to his head even though he stands over six feet himself. He does this almost every evening. Of course, the fire is fake because it never gets that cold. Back and forth he walks, thinking out loud. He allows me in the room with him because he enjoys my company. Since Grandma died, I think he enjoys my company most of all. Besides, he thinks of me as his little girl who pays no attention to the conversations he carries on with himself about his disappointment with the state of the world. But I'm no longer a little girl and always pay attention. I read or draw but also listen. The one thing I

learned from my father is that the world is in constant turmoil and always has been.

That day the Russnuts, according to Father a decrepit nation leftover from the Great War, was the topic. Their leader Chairman Vladimir Molotov had just announced to the world, or what is left of it, that they would not complete an outer atmosphere space station if the Usatopia didn't dismantle its missile defense net. Father said this was just another ploy to get attention and get him to abandon his favorite military strategy to protect Usatopia from attack.

When I asked him who would most likely attack us, he said, "No nation would be so foolish, but there are still nuclear weapons everywhere. They were not all used or destroyed during the Great War, and, unfortunately, except for us the peoples of the world have retrogressed to a state of barbarism. None can be trusted, especially the Russnuts and the fanatics of the Middle East and Far East Empires. They look favorably on Chairman Molotov's complaint, claiming that they had completely disarmed after the war and that today the only threat to world peace are the arsenals controlled by Usatopia. I do not trust them. The war proved that trust can be fatal. They have nothing to fear from us because we remain a civilized society. Don't you worry, Elen, because it's all bluster. You have nothing to fear from the barbarians."

Father laughed, "The Russnuts' space station is also nothing but empty boasting. They've been working on their space station for decades. I doubt they'll ever finish it. And to what purpose? The war ended any hopes of exploring space. Most people have lost interest in space or in international affairs or threats to their homeland. Still, it's my job to look out for the interests of Usatopia. And I will."

He thinks of nothing else. I went to Computer to find out about the nation of Russnuts and the Middle East and the Far East Empires. Computer said that nations and empires ceased to exist after the Great War. All that's left of human civilization are a few megacities, urbanspheres like Usatopia. They did not suffer attacks from nuclear weapons nor were they completely emptied of people by the Great Plague. The megacities became magnets for what was left of humanity. Computer said their military threat to Usatopia is nonexistent. When I told Father what Computer said he became irritated. "Computer doesn't know everything! Computer is too damn trusting of the barbaric peoples that threaten us."

I said I thought Computer knew everything. Father smiled. "That's what most people believe, sweetheart. Computer knows only what we want it to know. Classified information is kept from Computer because it doesn't run Usatopia. I do. I'm responsible for the people of Usatopia, not Computer. I apologize for raising my voice. The Russnuts always put me in a foul mood." After that, I thought it best to avoid talking politics with Computer and Father.

As you can see, Grandma, things haven't changed much here, except for me. I'm taller now, like father, but unlike Father or Mother, I am still very blond and light skinned. I once asked Father why I looked so different from him and Mother... from everyone really. He said I was a blessing of ancient recessive genes. I understood, but was still puzzled. To me, I'm a freak of nature. You didn't think so, Grandma. You used to say that a star had given birth to me because that was the only explanation for the stardust in my hair and eyes.

Getting back to Father, he told me a secret that inspired me to go on my journey. After dinner he retired to his broodery, as he usually does. I waited for him to be done considering his big thoughts then entered quietly to show him a drawing I made for him, hoping it would please him. Immediately, I saw he was in one of his darker moods. Mother calls them his political moods. I knew that it was impossible to reach him when he was possessed by such a mood. So I sat and waited in a big armchair hidden in a dark corner of the room and watched my dear, worried father pace back and forth talking out loud to himself before the heatless fire. As I sat there, I thought about his greatness and was filled with admiration. I'll never understand what attracted him to a life filled with so much worry and responsibility.

It was not long before Father noticed me. He suddenly stopped pacing and looked about the dimly lit room, smiled, and beckoned me to come into the light of the fire.

"My child, why do you hide in the darkness?"

"I didn't want to disturb you, Father. I knew you were thinking about the world."

"I was. How did you know, my love?"

"That's what you always think about in this room."

That is true. He goes to the broodery to get away from his human and robot advisors, counselors, advocates, supporters, attendants, and secretaries who constantly follow him, seeking to speak to him or to record his every thought. In the room are the portraits of the great leaders who created the nation that gave birth to Usatopia. Father often stands quietly before the portrait of George Washington or the bust of Lincoln. Not long ago, I visited broodery to be near father and found him

looking at the portrait of Thomas Jefferson. I asked him why these men were so special to him.

“These were great men, Elen. Their age was simpler but more profound and more hopeful than ours. It was a time when men had more time to think. Such men are no longer possible in a world that has become so complex that it cannot be managed by any man, however great he might be. Perhaps the world was always like that. Still, in the past the world was not a single entity but a place of many nations and peoples that lived independently of one another. Today, all that exists are the fragmented city-states that survived the war, none of which get along with one another. These men were great men and effective leaders because they could inspire others, and they could solve problems. Of course, new problems would arise, but at least important problems were solved.

“Washington helped free Americans from British oppression and by doing so brought America into existence, Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, and Lincoln ended slavery in America. After Lincoln came the rise of the machines. You know I love robots, but I do not love machines that destroy. Unwise men took control of the world and devoted themselves to inventing weapons that could destroy entire societies. Such foolishness! Humanity ceased to progress—only their machines—some good and some evil. It would take the Great War to end the idiocy but also civilization—except for here. War has ended. At least that’s my hope, but the world has been thrown into a state of barbarity. Beyond Usatopia lies only savagery. Sometimes I feel as if I’m the only leader who seeks to prevent further regression.”

“You’re a great man, Father, as great as those you admire.”

“So I seem to you because I’m your father, beauty.”

“But you’re Chairman and people love you.” Father did not reply. Instead, he walked over to the fire and gazed at the fake flames and the smoke made from water vapor. He once told me that his electric fireplace was better than a real fireplace. It was clean and did not pollute or waste wood, which was scarce, and it could be used even when the weather was warm. When I asked him why have a fireplace that produces no heat, he said, “Nostalgia, my dear, nothing more.” I didn’t understand and waited thinking he would explain, but he just stood silently looking into the fire. After a minute, he said, “Elen, I’m going to tell you a secret just between you and me.”

“I won’t tell anyone, Father. I promise. What is it?”

“It’s this. I think I would rather live as a common man among the Simpletons than be Chairman among my own people.”

I didn’t understand. I had heard that the Simpletons were a wild people, uncivilized. That Father would say such a thing was very surprising to me, so I asked, “Who are these people you would rather be with, Father?”

“They were the first men and women, my sweet, and they lived in beauty.”

“Do they live here in Usatopia?”

“None live in the urbansphere. It is believed they live in the lost lands, far beyond civilization.”

“Why would you want to live in the lost lands, Father? Isn’t Usatopia’s urbansphere the best place in all the world?”

“Of course it is.”

“Why are these people called Simpletons, Father?” I persisted.

"They lack our technological sophistication. They are a people time abandoned. They do not progress, nor do they regress."

"You mean they don't have autos, computers, and robots?"

"They have none of those things or electricity or water in their homes. They raise corn and sheep and make their own food and clothes. They live in a land without streets or highways. Among them, the conveniences of civilization have disappeared. They had them once, but after the Age of Devastation that followed the war and plagues everything beyond the urbansphere deteriorated. Cities and towns crumbled; roads and highways decayed. Today, they live someplace where there are only trails."

"It sounds horrible, Father. I don't know how you could even joke about living with them. You're just being funny, aren't you?"

"Yes, honey, I was joking. Still, in fairness to the Simpletons, their way of life did not deteriorate. It returned to an ancient way of living that is truly beautiful. They recaptured something we lost."

"Why did we lose it, Father?"

"I suppose we became too big and too complex. We devote our lives to too many things that are not so important. Your grandmother would know better than I what it is we have lost. Unfortunately, she's no longer with us. I'm sorry."

"I know Grandma loved the old way of life on the farm. I guess she felt as you do. But I thought it was just because she hated machines. She never spoke of the Simpletons. If they are so important, Father, why don't you go and find them. I would like to see them. Perhaps you would be happy then." Father

smiled, then took me by the hand, led me to the divan, and sat me down next to him. For a minute, we watched the fake fire together. Then he spoke.

“Oh, my darling, your father is too busy right now dealing with the constant threats of the Russnuts and other uncivilized peoples. And Usatopia has plenty of problems of its own. It’s a machine that needs constant tending to.”

“Why is that so, Father?”

“Because it’s an imperfect machine.”

“But why?”

“People are why.”

“Is that why you love robots so much?”

“You’re an insightful girl. You may be right. I never thought of my love of robots in that way. Elen, I fear I’ve given you the impression that I’m unhappy. At this moment with you, I’m not. And I’m not as unhappy as I sometimes appear to be when I am thinking about matters of state. Even then I have you, and you make me very, very happy. I’m afraid that the Simpletons don’t like us very much. I don’t blame them, really. Long ago, thousands of Simpletons were killed by predator drones. They were called savage terrorists undeserving of life.”

“Why, Father?”

“They derailed and robbed trains and sabotaged mechanized farms.”

“Then they were bad.”

“They did bad things, yes. But we invaded their territories, set up farming, mining, and drilling colonies, what was then called Red Zones. Outsiders who entered them were killed by automated machine guns or robo-snipers. At the time, the Corporate Oligarchy sought to kill the Simpletons into

extinction. Not only drones were used. Explosive mines were dropped throughout their territory. The Corporate Oligarchy truly hated them. Later, it was discovered that Simpleton reservations were being used to test autonomous weapons technology. It is said that many of the killings were recorded on spy cameras and that the Oligarchy would watch the videos for entertainment.”

“They were awful men. No wonder the Simpletons hate us.”

“No wonder at all. I’m not even sure the Simpletons committed all the crimes attributed to them. After the war swarms of crazies roamed the outersphere. Beyond the boundaries of the urbansphere, the land had become savage. Farming and mining communities became forts protected by predator drones and operated mostly by robots. The Simpletons disappeared. Today, they are few in number and hidden in distant wildlands. Understandably, they would continue to hate us and would try to kill us if we went to them. It’s better to leave them be. We’ve done them enough harm.”

“They would hate us even though you and I don’t hate them?”

“I’m afraid the harm we caused them was too great to be forgiven.”

“We could go in your armored air cruiser just to see them.”

“Yes, honey, I suppose we could do that, but we won’t. They would hide from us, and we would not see them. It is doubtful that there are many left.”

“Can’t blame them for not wanting to be killed.”

“That isn’t the only reason. Today, it would be illegal for us to visit them in a government cruiser. I would be violating

the Treaty of Autonomy that prevents us from interfering with any group of people as long as they cause no harm to others.”

“It’s good not to interfere with other people, isn’t it?”

“It is. That means even the Chairman of Usatopia would be violating the treaty if I entered their territory in a government ship without permission. Most likely it would be illegal to send spy drones to find out where they live. That would mean you and I would have to take a ground vehicle in search of them. And very few people who leave Usatopia on their own return from the wildlands. They disappear, killed or kidnapped, or they join one of the tribes. It’s no place for us. Besides, what I said was wishful thinking not intended to be taken seriously. I have no desire whatsoever to live among the Simpletons or even to meet them. Our ways of life are contradictory, one modern the other ancient. Let’s change the subject, my love. What is that you have under your arm?”

“It’s a painting of cherry trees that I painted just for you.” Father took the painting from me and held it up to the firelight. “It’s beautiful, Elen.” The painting was very naive, but Father saw none of its faults, or at least he didn’t let on to me if he did. He said it was beautiful because it had been painted by the one person who could always make him happy. But he had a question.

“Tell me, Elen, where did you see cherry trees?”

“Computer downloaded it from the Cloud for me. The trees grew on the island of Japan.”

“Ah yes. Japan was once a very marvelous and remarkable place. It was a great pity to lose it. Still, it exists in the Cloud. Thank you for the painting. I love it.” He looked at it again.

“Elen, honey, who is that walking among the trees? Is that your mother?”

"No, Daddy, that's your mother, Grandma Rose."

"So you placed her among trees."

"Grandma loved trees."

"Yes, she did. I should have known that was her by the flowery blue dress. She loved to wear flowery dresses. It's a shame you have to go to the mall or a party to see women wearing dresses."

"Why is that, Father?"

"I'm not sure. Most women think dresses are old fashioned. Dresses make them feel girlish and vulnerable. Your mother once said she'd never wear one alone out on the street. Doing so would make her feel like a prostitute. Of course, she's never alone, or out on the streets except in a vehicle."

Father continued to examine the painting. He seemed to be searching for something in the woman wearing a blue dress, standing among the trees, surrounded by pink cherry blossoms, and above a blue sky decorated with small white clouds. Or perhaps he wasn't looking so much as remembering Grandma.

Then he said, "Elen, you know that your grandmother was one of the last to experience the old ways that existed before the Age of Devastation."

"Yes, Father. Grandma used to tell me stories about her childhood on the farm."

"Ah, she did!" he said surprised. "Why was it I never heard her tell you those stories?"

"You were never around when she told them to me in the garden. She wouldn't tell them anywhere else. You know Mother never liked Grandma talking about the old times."

"Your mother is a thoroughly modern woman."

He returned to the painting. "I like your painting, Elen. It's beautiful." I gave Father a big hug because I was pleased that I had made him smile.

Father brought the painting to dinner to show Mother, who always acts pleased to please Father. She thinks there are better ways for me to spend my time than painting and drawing.

"Always shut up in your room painting or reading or in the garden daydreaming. You don't get out enough. You should come with me more often to the Great Mall and be around people. You're off by yourself so much that it's like having no child at all. And to think the mall was named after your father..."

"That's not true, dear," said father. "The mall honors first and foremost Consumers. The first seven levels are dedicated to their pleasure. The other eighty-three levels are devoted to the harmonious operation of Usatopia for the benefit of all its citizens."

"Still," said Mother, "you and your controllers are the most important. You occupy the highest levels."

"Only the top three, dear."

I had never heard the Great Mall talked about in this way by Father. All I knew was that the mall was for shopping. So I asked Father what was on the other ninety levels.

"Those levels are occupied by organizations that are leaders in business, science, and security. Their primary goal is the welfare of all the people of Usatopia. As Chairman, my responsibility is to oversee their harmonious operation."

"That's why, Elen, your father is the most important man in Usatopia."

“Your mother loves to brag on me, Elen, but the controllers are equally important. Without them I could not do my job.”

“Nonsense. You demean yourself by saying that. Many of the controllers are robots. There’s no comparison. You’ve done more for Usatopia than any of the others—robot or human. Thank goodness a human is still in charge.” However, nobody, not even Mother, calls the mall the Chairman’s Mall. They just call it the Great Mall. Then Mother went on at me.

“You would think that since your Grandmother died, you would spend some time with me at the mall. But each time I invite you, you become mopey. When you’re with my friends you’re never cheerful. You take all the fun out of going to the mall. I’ll never understand you, Elen.”

It seems Mother and I can never talk without her saying things that hurt me and make me want to be by myself. I hate making her unhappy. We’re just different. When she noticed that she hurt my feelings, she smiled and said that my painting was very pretty. Father was pleased.

Father was then called away from the table, saying as he left that he would be busy for the rest of the evening. Father is always being called away to speak to this and that official about this and that matter of state, and gradually the old gloom returns. I once told him that I wished he’d keep those men out of the house. Father rarely laughs, but he let out a big ha ha and said that was the best advice he had received all day. That pleased me very much.

Before he left, he thanked me again for the painting, but he forgot to take it with him. I took it to my room. That night in my room I kept thinking that Father and I should go away to live with the Simpletons. We would have time to be together

then and wouldn't always be interrupted by other people. I thought that we ought to go away because being here makes Father so gloomy, but I knew he would never leave. He was, after all, the Chairman.



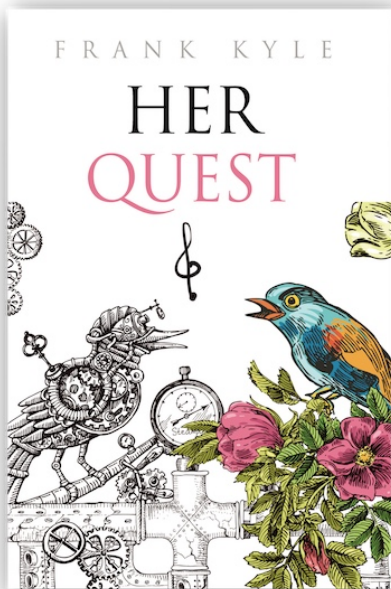
I haven't seen Father since we talked about the Simpletons. Mother says he has been busy with affairs of state and that I shouldn't be moping about just because I can't see him whenever I want. Well, I can't help it. For the first time in my life I realize that my father is a sad man. I know that he has a lot of responsibilities, but I think there is something else that makes him sad. I don't know what it is, but I believe the answer is to be found among the Simpletons. Otherwise, why would Father have talked about them in the way he did? I don't know. But perhaps if I went to the Simpletons, then Father would come to get me, and the Simpletons would welcome him as their guest. That way Father would be away from all his problems, and he and I could be together among the Simpletons.

Mother would be angry, of course, but if it made Father happy again, it would be worth the scolding I would get.

The big question is how do I get to the Simpletons. I can't even leave the Chairman's mansion. All the Secret Service bots know me. The only way to escape the White House is to go with Mother on one of her shopping sprees to the Great Mall. She would be delighted. I would put on a happy face. I would then have all day to try to find a way out of the mall. I'm sure that won't be easy because Mother said the mall is very safe, that all the entrances and exits are secure. I know Mother wouldn't give me exit authorization. It's still worth a try.

Her Quest

The sun is setting and the sky is afire as it usually is this time of day. It doesn't seem natural, but as father says, very little is natural in the urbansphere. None of that matters now. I will soon begin my quest to find the Simpletons and with them Father's happiness.



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