



Flagg Flying Overhead

Officer Rita Riatac of the new State of Florida Time Management Division stands in the doorway of the Coffee Pot Bayou mansion in St. Petersburg and nods at the retreating gardener. Pushing back her gray cap, she looks about the three-story center hall, its glass door, windows, and marble floor - all ornamented with jeweled dragonflies.

Rita hears none of the normal scurrying of forced packing as she makes her way through the well-appointed rooms. She notes more dragonflies in stained glass and on pillows.

Rita opens a hall door in a corner of the mansion to a nearly bare room with two walls of windows and a wide plank floor. In the center of the room, there is a tall easel, wooden stool, and rolling palette cart, empty of its pastels. On two walls, ghost marks remain of oval, square, and rectangular picture frames.

Rita climbs the spiral staircase to inspect six bedrooms and bathrooms. In the master suite, she is pleased to see the king-sized bed is stripped of its bedding and personal effects are nowhere in sight. Rita opens French doors onto a balcony and finally spies

Flagg Flying Overhead

Reggie Morrissey © 2010

her new client. He is lounging in a spa tub next to a pool, his eyes scanning the mouth of the bayou and Tampa Bay, his gray hair sun-flecked.

Rita calls to him. "You'll come out now, Mr. Flagg. It's time to go."

He remains still.

"It's past time to go."

Flagg does not turn to see *his* pursuer as he considers the pair of dolphins arching in the waters just past the sea wall. He knows they will chase hapless fish into the wall to stun them into becoming lunch.

Flagg rises from the foaming spa and stretches, tan, naked, and glistening in the sun. He fingers the thick silver chain around his neck and tugs at the silver dragonfly it holds like a large and exotic cross. Without a glance back, he executes a shallow dive into his pool and swims across it underwater. Rita sighs as he commences a medley of breaststroke, butterfly, backstroke and freestyle.

Flagg keeps up the routine as a waterfall cascades at one end of the pool and bayou waves lap against the seawall. At the end of a dock, the cleats on the 30-foot sailboat *Dragonfly* clink in the wind.

As a state productivity officer in the new division, Rita is getting used to all manner of resistance. But, she is also an ex-lifeguard, impressed by the grace under pressure of this 50-something year-old man, who is about to surrender the trappings of life for his failure to remain a productive citizen.

Flagg Flying Overhead

Reggie Morrissey © 2010

Rita studies Flagg's stroke. She moseys down the stairs. Poolside, she sits in a lounge chair and flips through the notes on her clipboard.

Apparently, this artist and recent widow has been tagged by the State for gross unproductively. As part of his rehabilitation, he is expected to complete three contemporary paintings per week by computer program at a company in Clearwater.

Rita glances at the balcony and turret. Looks like he had been doing okay with what he had painted – War World II-era aircraft and airmen – as his profile says. But his business is floundering with a dwindling, dying WWII clientele and without his wife's presence as his manager; the widower is not keeping up with society's expectations, and not responding to its call to get on with life. The State cannot afford such an early retirement or steep dip in the profitable local art market.

Rita stands commandingly over the pool. This is the first artist Rita has had to reform. Production is not clear cut with artists.

Flagg gazes up at Rita. "I want to put my own combination lock on the TM POD."

"Not part of the protocol."

"I've got a fortune in artwork stored in there!"

"Contemporary paintings?"

Flagg throws back his head and laughs.

Rita sighs, tells Flagg to go back to his swimming and places a call to her supervisor. She kicks away a dragonfly-decked ottoman, hugs a phone to her ear, and goes up the chain

Flagg Flying Overhead

Reggie Morrissey © 2010

of TM command to a manager who likes art. He okays Flagg's personal lock for the storage unit parked in the front of the mansion. Rita nods at Flagg.

Flagg studies the TM officer's 30-something's short-clipped hair and sharply defined features. For all of her trim frame, she has a commanding presence and does not seem flustered by his insubordination. He dons a towel and obeys this time when Rita tells him to pack up and heed her valuable lessons.

Flagg, dressed in Dockers, white shirt and loafers, walks with Rita onto the dock. She tells him the soon-to-arrive new mansion tenants – winners in TM's latest productivity competition – will also get to use the sail boat.

"Of course, when you straighten out your life, you could get everything back."

Rita has a hard time reading Flagg's self-possessed smile. He boards the sailboat and comes out of its cabin with a smiling photo of himself, arm around what Rita supposes was his wife. Her long hair appears wet from a swim and her red bandana bikini flatters a petite frame.

Flagg crosses the front lawn, half-dragging his backpack. Rita, nodding at the fountain statuary, observes, "You've got quite a thing for dragonflies, Mr. Flagg."

"My wife did."

"Well, they give me the creeps."

Flagg Flying Overhead

Reggie Morrissey © 2010

Flagg locks the TM POD as the new tenants, an ecstatic young black couple, rushes from the street, smiles awkwardly at Flagg, and enters the front hall. As the couple whoops it up inside, Flagg and Rita share a shrug.

Walking past Flagg's vintage silver Aston Martin convertible in the driveway, Rita leads him to her motorcycle. In the sidecar, a German shepherd named Rules stirs. Rita hands the dog's leash to Flagg and rattles off his duties in caring for the state-owned training dog and the TM policy Rules is trained to follow. She checks her list a final time, and tells him, "Oh, and you can't use the, let's see ... P51D Mustang ... parked at the municipal airport."

Flagg shrugs again. Rita hands Flagg a St. Petersburg / Clearwater bus pass and schedules, the dog's leash, a vet card, and TM rehabilitation brochure. "You can start reading on the next bus if you hurry."

Flagg walks away with Rules. The first task is to board the bus for the downtown TM rehab center, an abandoned YMCA, where he is to register for a room and productivity training.

Sitting on the back of the bus, Flagg glances at another TM candidate and *her* dog. The woman sniffs and looks away as two elderly ladies argue about allowing dogs on the bus. The TM-bound woman erupts at their tisk-tisking, "Who are you calling helpless! I was VP of Operations for a major company." They all finish the trip in silence as she mutters an irate, "Helpless!"

Exiting the bus, the ex-VP brushes past Flagg as he and Rules head to Central Avenue.

Flagg Flying Overhead

Reggie Morrissey © 2010

Rita walks up behind them and a-hems for his attention. They enter the TM center together and Flagg signs in.

At 8 p.m., Flagg sits on the narrow bed in Room 13, the placid dog at his feet. The place could use some fresh paint and more than one 40-watt light bulb. He cannot bear to look at the “artwork” hung too high over the nightstand.

Dinner had been ... dreadful. Now, he is supposed to turn in. With unexpected fierceness, Flagg misses his running shoes. He misses his bike. He knows he will not wake to watch the sunrise on the dock.

But longing is nothing new. For months, he has missed cradling his wife in his arms in front of the patio fireplace ... and everywhere else they had happened upon each other in their lucid dream of a marriage.

Now, he yearns for a sail with her on the bay. He closes his eyes as he grieves for his palette of pastels and the peaceful zone he occupies when creating his paintings of the 1940s wild blue yonder.

Flagg stares down at the plastic-sealed bag holding a bed gown issued to him by TM. It looks like the washed-out hospital gown his beautiful wife had worn in her final days. Flagg drops the unopened bag on the floor, stripes off his clothes, and turns out the light, sighing, “Night, Rules.”

The next days follow a pattern of attempted work at a cube farm and post-dinner rehab sessions by the courtyard fountain with three other misfits. The routine is relieved by

Flagg Flying Overhead

Reggie Morrissey © 2010

occasional nights of swimming laps at the city's Olympic-sized pool on Tampa Bay, where Rita passes the time talking with lifeguards and Flagg swims an easy mile or two.

Flagg's bosses at the Artmart are not happy with his half-hearted forays into creating abstract paintings with computer-aided design tools. His work is deemed "too realistic." And, in their room at the TM center, Rules will not even let Flagg pick up a sketchpad and pencil without tugging on his sleeve to stop.

Mornings, he shakes his head of the dreams of paintings he will not paint and the voice of his wife, even in death, pursuing him with her charming, if half-baked affirmations about the richness of life. The latest he hears, "Be ready for your own good."

In honor of his wife, Flagg duly takes in Rita's words as she leads a rehab session by the fountain. She reminds Flagg, his band of fellow transgressors, and their lounging dogs that everything to succeed is within their grasp.

"That's what my wife always said," mumbles Flagg, fingering the silver dragonfly hanging from his neck. "Not much good it did her when she died."

Rita is at a loss for words. Slouching next to her, a bored man whose trust fund is about to run out, files his nails. And the spitfire ex-VP, who can barely sit still for this intimate moment, retreats to her comfort zone to mutter about corporate politics.

Flagg continues his routine - walk Rules, eat little, sleep fitfully, swim laps, and count the days when he will officially relinquish everything.

Flagg Flying Overhead

Reggie Morrissey © 2010

Swimming at dusk one evening at the city pool by Tampa Bay, Flagg catches a glimpse of Rita flirting with a lifeguard and Rules staring back at him from the base of the lifeguard's chair.

Flagg resumes his backstroke and smiles when a dragonfly buzzes overhead. "Hey, buddy!" Flagg chuckles, "My wife send you?"

But a second dragonfly passes over Flagg's face, then another, and another. Flagg watches hundreds of dragonflies cruise over the pool from the bay. The hundreds turn into thousands and thousands, flying from just above the water to high in the air.

As the dragonflies keep coming with a faint flapping of wings, a frantic Rita and lifeguard scramble to cover their heads with towels and crouch down against the pelting, inescapable swarm. Even Rules crosses his paws over his eyes. Everyone on deck is taking cover.

That's when Flagg hoists himself from the pool and bursts through the curtain of dragonflies and out the pool gate. Barefoot, he bounds across a great swatch of lawn to a path on the bay, leaving behind the onlookers mesmerized by the swarm over the pool. When he reaches the south end of the park, Flagg glances back, then dives into the water, and begins to swim toward a pier road jutting into the bay.

Flagg figures jumping into the bay at dusk has its downside, given more than one shark attack off The Pier. Then too, he is not an open water swimmer. He plows across the water, but his progress is slowed by disorienting swells and waves and his growing fatigue. He floats on his back and warily eyes two dorsal fins close by. He hears his wife's

Flagg Flying Overhead

Reggie Morrissey © 2010

voice, “Be open to your good” and laughs when two dolphins rise up, clicking and smiling at him. As darkness falls, he swims without incident under the roadbed and past Demans Landing.

Flagg clambers onto the edge of the municipal airport and makes his way along the runway to a line of small planes. As he runs, he unclasps the silver dragonfly hanging on his neck and unsheathes the key it holds to his World War II vintage P51D Mustang.

The cockpit of the legendary plane is just as Flagg remembers, stocked with his locked mini-safe, bottled water and energy bars. He squeezes himself into the single seat, clamps the overhead bubble canopy shut, starts the engine, and maneuvers the plane onto the runway for takeoff.

Flagg flies southwest to the Gulf of Mexico, so he does not see Rita on her motorcycle and Rules in his sidecar in their drive north to his mansion. They rush onto the dock, where the good ship *Dragonfly* clicks its cleats under the stars and its lucky tenants gulp down a late happy hour after a highly productive day.

With the Mustang’s 1,100 mile range, Flagg will fly to the Bahamas, where an offshore bank will release the funds he needs for a new life. That will include money he promised to his former gardener for shipping the squirreled away contents of the TM POD to an island home.

Flagg shakes his head as the old plane engine works its high-pitched drone. He considers his unlikely liberation ... by a swarm of dragonflies, and pictures the series of paintings he will render of them in the wild blue yonder.

Flagg Flying Overhead
Reggie Morrisey © 2010

Who would believe it, but his wife? Just as she had believed in his art and in him until the moment she died ... and apparently, then some. For the first time in months, Flagg concedes there just might be more to life after all.