The Cloud-Swing

Eithne Gallagher
Margherita sighed, another day without school. In the beginning she was thrilled to stay home, but slowly she had started to miss the alarm clock, rushing her breakfast and doing the last bits of uncompleted homework. Life was no longer normal.

She looked out of her bedroom window onto what was once her busy road, via San Gratiliano, the sun warmed her face and shoulders as she admired the clear blue sky that held only a couple of clouds. It was a day for going to the park, only there was no hope of that. She wasn’t allowed out of the house. Mum wasn’t going to school either. She now spent most of her day interacting with the children from her computer. Dad had to go to out. He worked in a chemist’s. He had to be
there for the people. He stood in the doorway of her room and air-blew a kiss at Margherita from his masked face. She blew one back and then returned to her window.

Margherita wondered what all the other people in Bassano Romano were doing cooped up in their apartments. Her thoughts were interrupted by a cloud blowing its way towards her. Two long wispy strips holding a seat together. ‘A swing, how beautiful,’ she exclaimed. Her window blew open and a blustery voice said, ‘Hop on!’

Before Margherita had a chance to reason and be logical she climbed out of the window and sat down. ‘This is madness,’ she said, ‘I am sitting on a cloud.’ The breeze whisked her above the large beeches on via San Gratiliano. Yes, she was looking down at trees; dendritic twigs with unblossomed leaves tickled her feet before she rose above them.

‘Where to?’ the blustery voice whispered.

‘To the seaside,’ she replied.
The sea was a sad kind of calm and the beach empty except for a solitary, stray dog sniffing the sand. On a normal day there would be walkers, joggers, paddlers, even a brave swimmer or two. Loneliness engulfed Margherita.

‘Let’s go to Cortina,’ she ordered the breeze.

Suddenly wisps of cloud were wrapping themselves around her. In no time she was wearing a beautiful, cosy shawl. The mountains were below her. They wore their snow proudly. She swung through the gigantic fir trees that lined the empty slopes into the middle of the town. The chalets looked warm and inviting. Here too people were indoors leaving the snow abandoned, secluded in its sadness.

Margherita gave a sorrowful sigh.

‘Where to next?’ murmured the Blustery Breeze.

‘Venezia, please,’ Margherita replied.

She waved goodbye to the doleful Dolomites.
Soon they were flying in the middle of The Grand Canal. They swung under the Rialto Bridge there were no boats to block their way. The fish market was open and Margherita saw the first people of her trip. There were about ten in front of a fishmonger’s stall standing in a queue each one a metre apart from the other. She waved and shouted hello but no one looked up.

The cloud turned left and they travelled down a little canal. All the gondolas were parked on the left abandoned by their gondoliers. Two swans swam proudly past them reclaiming their ancient waters. The cloud swung around the tower in Piazza San Marco. Margherita wished she had some bread for the pigeons that strutted pompously around knowing they had the big square all to themselves.

‘Enough of Venice?’ asked the Blustery Breeze.
‘Yes,’ said Margherita.
As they pulled out into the Adriatic Sea, Margherita spotted dolphins spinning in the air before surfing an incoming wave. She waved and shouted, ‘Arrivederci.’

‘Shall we stop at Florence on our way home?’ whispered Blustery.

‘I’d like that,’ said Margherita.

Majestic cypress trees welcomed them to Tuscany. They sailed over fairy-tale castles and old farmhouses that clung to the steep sides of the Apennine Mountains. They blew right into the centre of Florence. Margherita marvelled as she looked down at the terracotta dome sitting below her. She remembered looking up at it on her third grade field-trip to the city. Then she was one of hundreds of tourists in Piazza del Duomo. But now the square was empty. The cloud drifted up over Giotto’s Bell Tower. It was time to go home.

There is no point in beautiful scenery and beautiful places if there are no people. People are what makes the world go round. These days all people are staying indoors, keeping away
from each other. It was necessary but it was sad. Margherita thought of the voices singing from their balconies at 6 o’clock every evening, on via San Gratiliano. Voices of hope against the invisible enemy. Right now, all Margherita wanted was to be with her people.

‘Please take me home,’ she said.

The Blustery Breeze gently blew the cloud all the way back to Bassano Romano and soon Margherita was home. Hopping off her cloud-swing at her bedroom window, she blew a kiss to Blustery, climbed in through the open window and ran into the kitchen where Mum was preparing breakfast.

‘Buongiorno,’ she beamed.

Life is about people.

Without people even the most magnificent places are lonely and sad.

Margherita hugged her mother tightly. She hoped that soon, very soon, her beautiful Italy would be alive and well again.

Eithne Gallagher 13/3/2020
Write your own magic carpet trip through lockdown
by Julia Strong

Eithne Gallagher is a writer and education consultant who lives in Italy. When she saw the free work units we have been sending out, she thought children here might enjoy one her free stories that has been sent to children in Italy to support them during the lockdown there. Here are a few ideas for how children might use her story to write their own story about the lockdown.

Eithne Gallagher’s lovely story The Cloud-Swing tells of a young child’s magic journey on a cloud swing around Italy under lockdown. We see the famous cities of Italy through the eyes of a child saddened by the weeks of lockdown and a longing to see people.

Read the story to yourself or get a member of your family to read it to you. There’s one word in it we will probably all have to look up – dendritic – which means having a tree-like appearance.

Once you’ve read the story, you might want to try to write your own trip through lockdown. You could choose a magic carpet or have your own cloud-swing or microlight to magic you to wherever you want to go.

You could start by telling your reader a little about what the lockdown has been like for you. You might want to draw pictures to help us see what it’s been like. Here you can see Margherita looking out of the window of the flats where she lives at empty street below. Her thought bubble tells us that she is missing the alarm that used to tell her it was time to go to school and even missing the homework that she never quite finished. You could include your own version of a thought bubble.

Decide what your form of transport will be: a magic carpet, a cloud swing, a friendly witch or alien space ship, a microlight or ???

Then you could set off on your journey. You could visit lots of famous places in the country or you could just visit all the places that you’ve been to at some point in your life that you’ve really liked or places that you’ve always wanted to go. Do you have a wish jar in which you’ve been putting all the places you want to visit once the lockdown is over? You could order your magic transport to take you to all those places. Tell your reader what you can see and how you feel.

The ending: Margherita’s story has ended with her wanting to return home. You might want to end your story in the same way.

If you can speak Italian, you may want to look at all the material the publisher Galluci has sent out to support children during the lockdown: www.galluccieditore.com/emergenza/attivita/