

# **Debrecen Tales**

An International Experience



# Debrecen Tales

An International Experience



Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó  
Debrecen University Press  
2023

Editor and Course Manager: Steven Fischer  
Front Cover Design: Vivien-Barbara Biró  
Back Cover Design: Fruzsina Benke

Artists:

Dzhakypbekova Aizirek, Aurél Márk Kovács,  
Fruzsina Benke, Fruzsina Papp, Hend Ayari,  
Maksim Pelmegov, Maryem Ben Salem, Sumyat Swezin,  
Vivien-Barbara Biró

University of Debrecen Supervisor:  
Glant Tibor

### **Debrecen Tales: An International Experience**

is a collection of student works from the course, Cartoon Storytelling, offered in Spring 2023 at the University of Debrecen and is co-funded by The City of Debrecen.

ISBN 978-963-615-083-9

Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó / Debrecen University Press,  
beleértve az egyetemi hálózaton belüli elektronikus terjesztés

Kiadta: a Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, az 1795-ben alapított  
Magyar Könyvkiadók és Könyvterjesztők Egyesülésének a tagja  
dupress.unideb.hu  
Felelős kiadó: Karácsony Gyöngyi  
Nyomdai előkészítés: M. Szabó Monika

A nyomdai munkálatokat  
a Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó nyomdája végezte 2023-ban

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Tale of the City by <b>Fruzsina Benke</b> .....	9
Walk in the Park by <b>Fruzsina Papp</b> .....	15
Time (Well?) Spent by <b>Maksim Pelmegov</b> .....	20
Metanoia by <b>Sumyat Swezin</b> .....	25
A Wednesday Night in Deb by <b>Maryem Ben Salem</b> .....	31
Unfamiliar: How Quarantine Felt by <b>Aurél Márk Kovács</b> .....	37
Open Heart Open Mind by <b>Hend Ayari</b> .....	42
Eye to I by <b>Vivien-Barbara Biró</b> .....	47
Isn't It Difficult? by <b>Aizirek Dzhakypbekova</b> .....	52



# FOREWORD

by Steven Fischer

Two-time Emmy nominated  
Producer and Cartoonist

This collection of personal stories originated from a phone call with Glant Tibor, director of The American Studies MA and PhD programmes at the University of Debrecen. We wanted to repeat an experience we shared in 2014, when Tibor and the university hosted me as a Fulbright Specialist leading a group of graduate and undergraduate participants through Cartoon Storytelling, an intensive cartooning programme in which participants created personal comic book-style stories based on life experiences. "This time," we mutually proposed, "let's make a book that shows the international experience in Debrecen during a time of war, pandemic, and social crisis."

Similar to art therapy, we wanted to offer participants the chance to use cartoon art to untangle and express a mix of emotions, feelings, and memories in hopes of better understanding self and the world.

Not long after our call, nine cartoonists appeared before us. They came from Hungary, Tunisia, Myanmar, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and the United States, ranging from secondary to doctoral programmes. With such range of perspective, life experiences and artistry, I anticipated an exciting display of storytelling, and (as you'll soon discover) we were not disappointed.

The following pages are filled with a multitude of expression: an allegorical, near fanciful expression responding to life in lockdown told only in pantomime, a paper cut-out cartoon evoking the simple beauty of Ivor Wood's Paddington Bear animation, and sensitive character studies of disparate personalities.

The cartoons in this collection are the result of an experience called Cartoon Storytelling, an intense programme that is part academic and part production. Like a professional cartoonist, these artists have delivered original stories to their editor, but the method of production was quite a learning experience. We studied design, illustration, narrative structure, character development, and page layout among other aspects of cartooning. The participants were faced with the challenge all cartoonists face: how to use graphics images (body language, physiognomy, light, shadow, composition, text, framing, page layout, etc.) to show the inner journey of a character.

We studied the works of master storytellers such as Will Eisner, Renni Browne, and Lynda Barry. We examined how cartoon and non-fiction might combine to explore personal trauma, and how that exploration might lead to clarity, understanding, and healing. We read and discussed the work of Brian Fies, Art Spiegelman, and The Izzat

Project (a collection of cartoon stories from South Asian women using the form to tell personal stories of healing from violence).

The discoveries we made fueled the creation of our work. As one participant observed, "This project is so different from what I usually do. I need creativity in my life, and this is stimulating. The stimulation is improving my attention span and is something I need."

Others noted how the acts of creation, drawing, and reflection on trying personal experiences noticeably helped their mental health. The creative process offered release... and that empowering feeling of having a voice.

There are certain qualities a person should develop to make this experience fulfilling. A person must be, at their foundation, childlike. To be playful, spontaneous, curious and experimental positions one to be open-minded and enthusiastic about making discoveries. To be a great observer is crucial. In order to draw and write effectively, the cartoonist needs to understand nature, anatomy, architecture, how people talk, how relationships develop, how clothing folds when the body moves, and how light and shadow shape an object. The story must be driven by something that connects with an audience, some commonality that makes character and conflict relatable. And above all a person must have something to say.

Trust is another important quality. One must learn to trust one's instincts. It is how our characters speak to us. Many of the exercises we did aimed at conditioning trust, going within and reflecting, listening to our inner voice and learning to distinguish what we feel from what we think we feel.

It is easy to see how such qualities benefit not only the working artist, but also support our everyday life. Understanding the creative process helps us solve problems. Conditioning ourselves to be curious about our dream world conditions us to be curious about our awake world. And developing the habit of going within conditions reflection and a search for understanding.

There are also practical benefits. The exercises we practiced build communication skills, vocabulary, and the ability to tell a compelling story. These skills can easily be applied to a multitude of daily writing: emails, letters, résumés, essays, and reports.

When we presented Cartoon Storytelling at the University of Debrecen in 2014, the participants also used real life trauma as the basis for their stories. At the end of that project I asked the participants what they learned. One keenly observed, "I realized that things happen in life that don't always make sense until years later when they all connect to form meaning."

That kind of understanding leads to enlightenment, and it's one of the many benefits the cartoonists in this collection have positioned themselves to achieve.

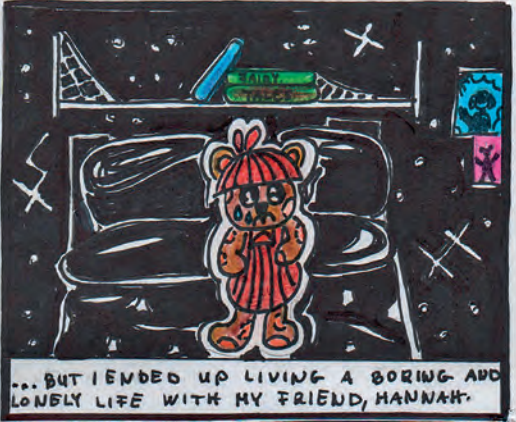
~ Steven Fischer  
Debrecen, Hungary, April 2023



# A tale of the City

by Fruzsika Benke

THE WORLD HAS ALWAYS FASCINATED ME, I WANTED TO TRAVEL AND EXPLORE IT...



... BUT I ENDED UP LIVING A BORING AND LONELY LIFE WITH MY FRIEND, HANNAH.

THE ONLY ADVENTURES WE DID GO ON WERE IMAGINARY. HANNAH LOVED READING..



BUT STORIES WEREN'T ENOUGH. ALL I COULD THINK OF WAS GOING ON A REAL ADVENTURE. SO ONE DAY, I DECIDED TO TAKE MATTERS INTO MY OWN PAWS. I WOULD HAVE A REAL ADVENTURE IN MY OWN CITY: DEBRECEN.

ONE DAY, I HID UNDER HANNAH'S BED AND WAITED FOR HER TO LEAVE FOR SCHOOL. IT FELT LIKE DEATH, BUT I KNEW I HAD TO DO IT.



I PACKED MY CLOTHES AND SNEAKED OUT THE WINDOW.





WHEN YOU ARE ONLY A SMALL BEAR, THE WORLD CAN SEEM TERRIFYING... BUT I WAS THRIVING!

I FOLLOWED THE CROWD AND ALSO GOT ON THE TRAM. I WAS PUSHED AND ALMOST STEPPED ON, BUT MY SIZE COULDN'T HOLD ME BACK.



LUCKILY, PEOPLE LOOKED OUT FOR ME.



A FEW STOPS LATER I DECIDED TO GET OFF AND WALK FOR A WHILE, WHEN...



A CASTLE! A REAL CASTLE! AND HERE, IN DEBRECEN. HANNAH WOULD LOVE THIS!

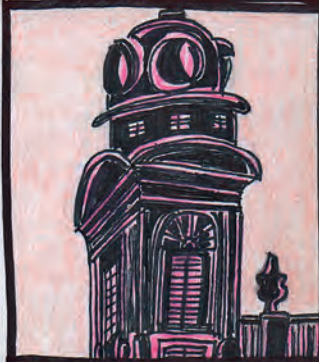


I WAS JUST BEGINNING TO DISCOVER THE WONDERS OF MY CITY!

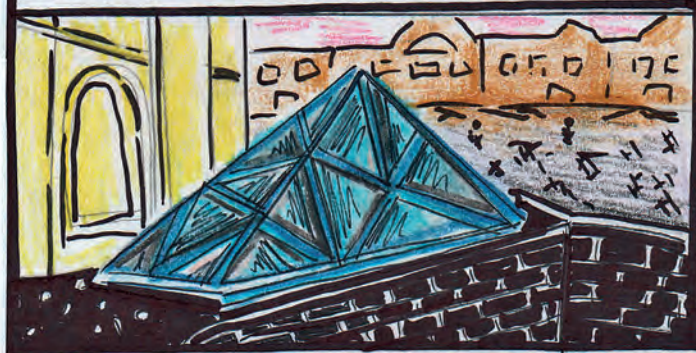




CONTINUING MY JOURNEY, I LAID EYES UPON A YELLOW BUILDING WHICH RULED THE CITY.



NEXT TO IT, I COULDN'T BELIEVE, WAS A PYRAMID! JUST LIKE IN EGYPT! IT WAS MADE OF GLASS.



TOURISTS WERE THROWING BREADCRUMBS TO THE PIGEONS. I REALLY WISH I HAD A CAMERA TO CAPTURE ALL THIS BEAUTY. OH! I REALLY WISH HANNAH WAS HERE TO SHARE THESE MOMENTS WITH ME.





I TOOK THE BUS THROUGH TOWN AND THE DRIVER WAS KIND ENOUGH TO LET ME SIT ON THE DASHBOARD, RIGHT BEHIND THE WINDSHIELD, I HAD A GREAT VIEW OF THE CITY.



TRAVELLING THROUGH TOWN, I WAS OBSERVING THE WORLD AROUND ME.

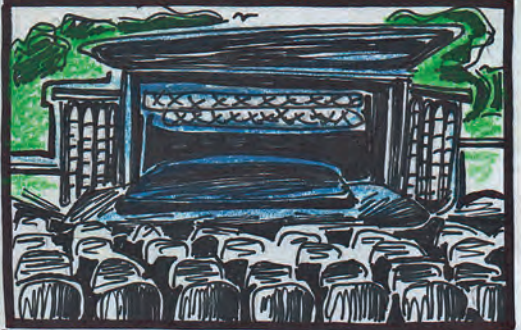


WHAT I FOUND MOST INTERESTING WAS HOW PEOPLE WERE LOOKING OUT FOR EACH OTHER. YOU COULD ALWAYS EXPECT A SMILE, A KIND WORD OR GESTURE FROM SOMEONE NO MATTER HOW BUSY THE OTHER ONE WAS. AND IT MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE.



WE REACHED A BIG FOREST. I THANKED THE DRIVER AND GOT OFF THE BUS. THIS PART OF DEBRECEN WAS MUCH MORE QUIET AND CALM, A LITTLE OASIS IN THE OTHERWISE BUSY CITY.





I FELT PEACEFUL HERE. I WALKED TO THE LAKE TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FISH.



THE WORLD WAS AMAZING. IT WAS NOTHING I HAD EVER EXPECTED. STILL, SOMETHING WAS MISSING: A FRIEND... MY FRIEND, HANNAH. ALL THIS DID NOT MATTER WITHOUT HER. IT WAS ONLY NOW THAT I REALISED HOW MUCH THOSE HOURS READING, CUDDLED UP ON THE LIVING ROOM SOFA MEANT FOR ME. AND PROBABLY FOR HER TOO. WE COULD HAVE GONE ON ALL THESE ADVENTURES TOGETHER: THE CASTLES, THE PYRAMIDS, THE BEAUTIFUL FOREST...



I WAS ABOUT TO LEAVE WHEN I SUDDENLY LOST MY BALANCE AT THE EDGE OF THE WATER.



The End



# Walk in the Park

by Fruzi Papp

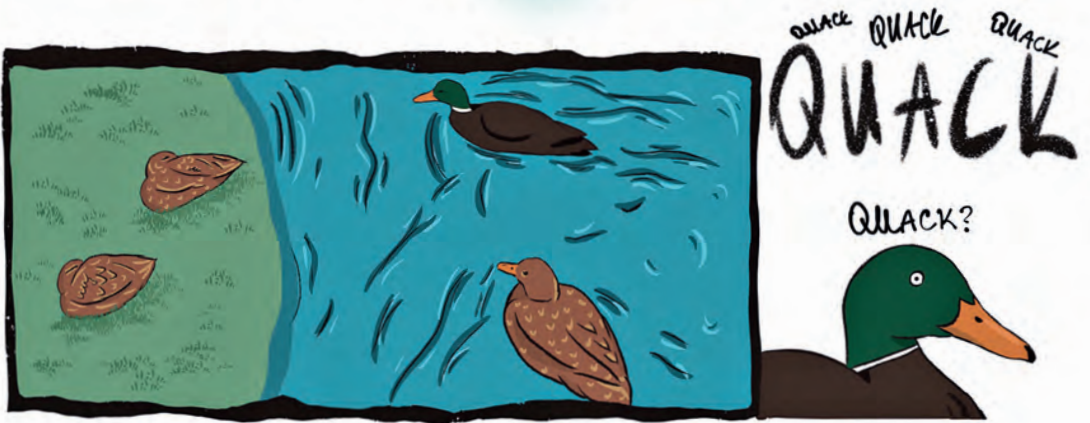


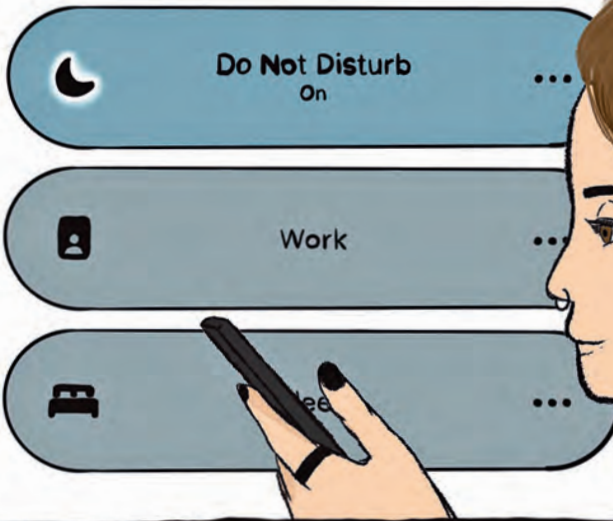


you should  
take a  
walk...











Warning: Shared bathroom with squirrels



unbothered



moisturized



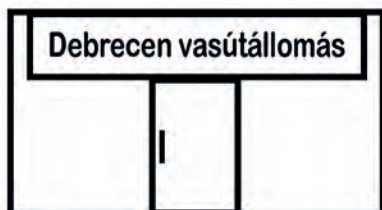
I did need this walk, I guess



the end

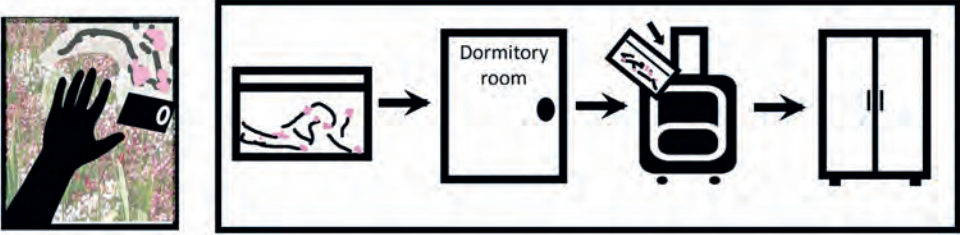
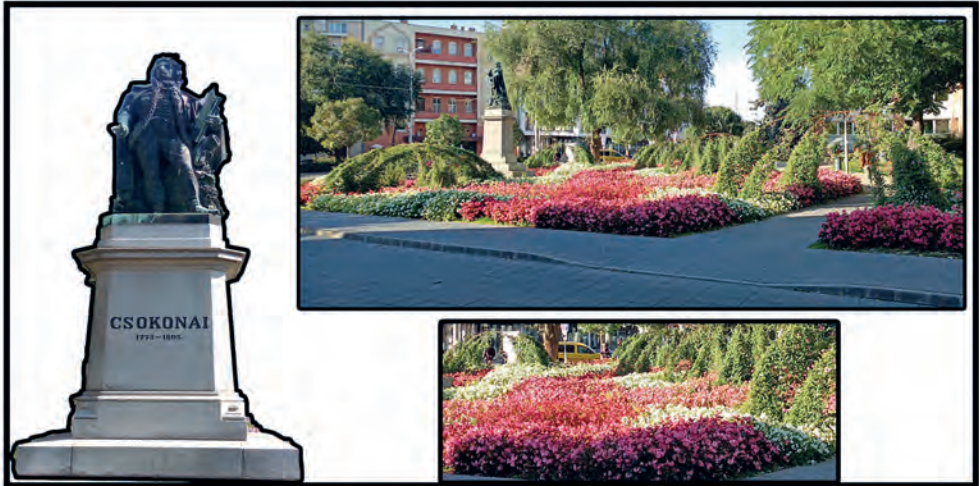
# Time (Well?) Spent

by Maksim Pelmegov



**Csokonai**  
**1773–1805**





Autumn

Winter

Spring

choo-choo



September





First memory of bike riding  
Let's watch this Youtube video  
To the next stage...



That castle sure was nice.  
I will help you however I can

The train arrives to Budapest at...

Yes, I finally did it!!



300 HUF -> 1200 HUF

And in 2015 I..

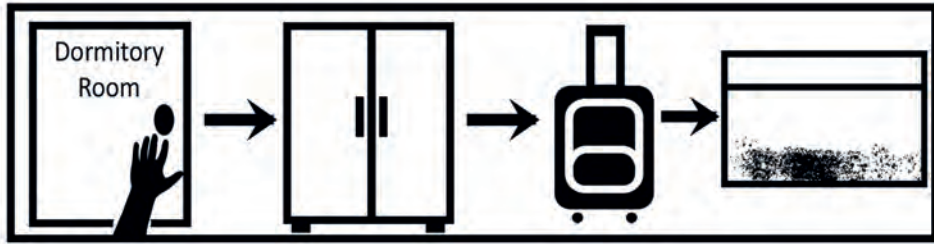
I wonder where are these people rushing..

It's better that you stay here... because of the war

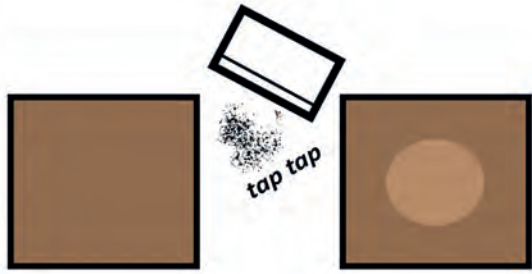
Hová mész? - ...

I like the weather here

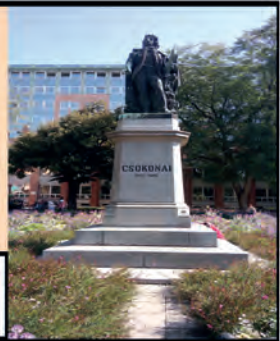
Party time!







As the life  
moves on...



*The End*



# METANOIA

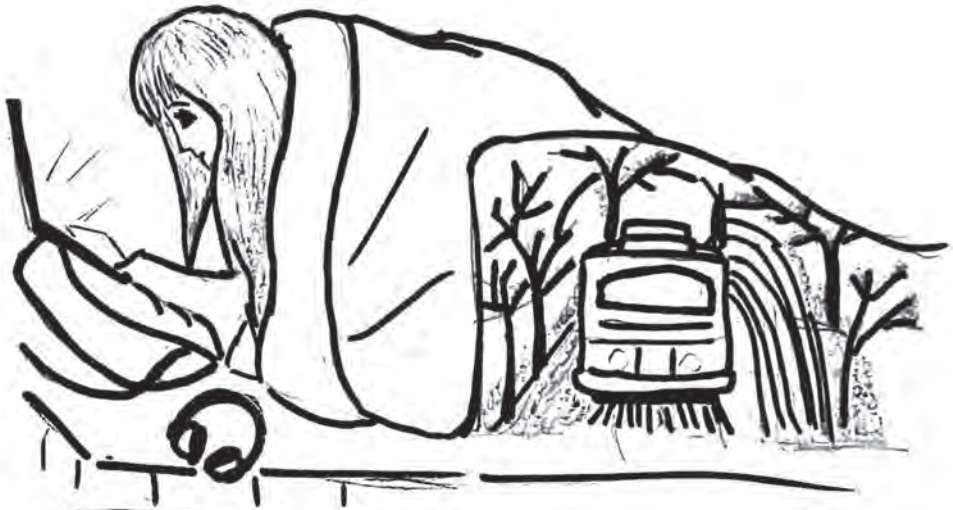
By Sumyat Swezin



As the autumn breeze swirled around her, Suu arrived in Debreceen feeling the weight of personal and collective changes brought on by the aftermath of Covid. It was during her Saturn Return period, a cosmic event that had an enormous impact on her life. With a heart heavy from a recent heartbreak, Suu couldn't help but worry about the unknown future that lay ahead, knowing that this astrological period would last for over two years. As Saturn made its return to the sign of her birth, Suu wondered what destiny had in store for her.



A period of painful transition from the carefree days of youth to the daunting responsibilities of adulthood. This is a time of metanoia, a time when she must confront the darkness within herself and emerge on the other side, scarred but wiser.



Wrapped in a cozy quilt, she posted an autumnal scene of Debrecen on Insta with a hashtag kiss!

"Leaves falling, yet rooted in stillness. #Autumn #Debrecen"



Winter tiptoed into Debrecen, sprinkling snowflakes outside the window while Suu and her dear friend Alex enjoyed a cozy chat over steaming cups of coffee.



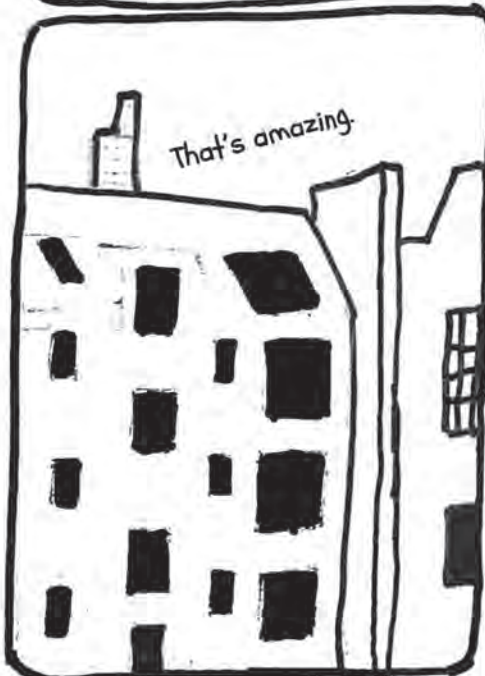


I enjoy watching the world pass by through the window, whether it is snowflakes, autumn leaves or while riding a bus or train.

That sounds lovely.



You know? My father once said no two snowflakes are the same, they have their own distinct patterns, like people do.



That's amazing.



As Alex departed, Suu gazed out the window, lost in thought while snow fell. She realized the moment had come to welcome change, akin to snowflakes descending to the earth. Her Saturn return would transform her, like snowflakes melting into the unknown.





It's a time when you might feel a strong sense of responsibility, structure, and discipline, and you'll experience some pretty important life lessons. But don't worry, I have a friendly tip for you! If you want to minimize any negative effects during this time, try feeding the crows.



Longer days, fresh weather, season of rebirth. However, Suu couldn't shake off her worries about her Saturn return and what it might bring. Recalling the guidance of the astrologer, Suu turned to a ritual to ease her concerns. There was no better time to engage with the world and find solace in its beauty.

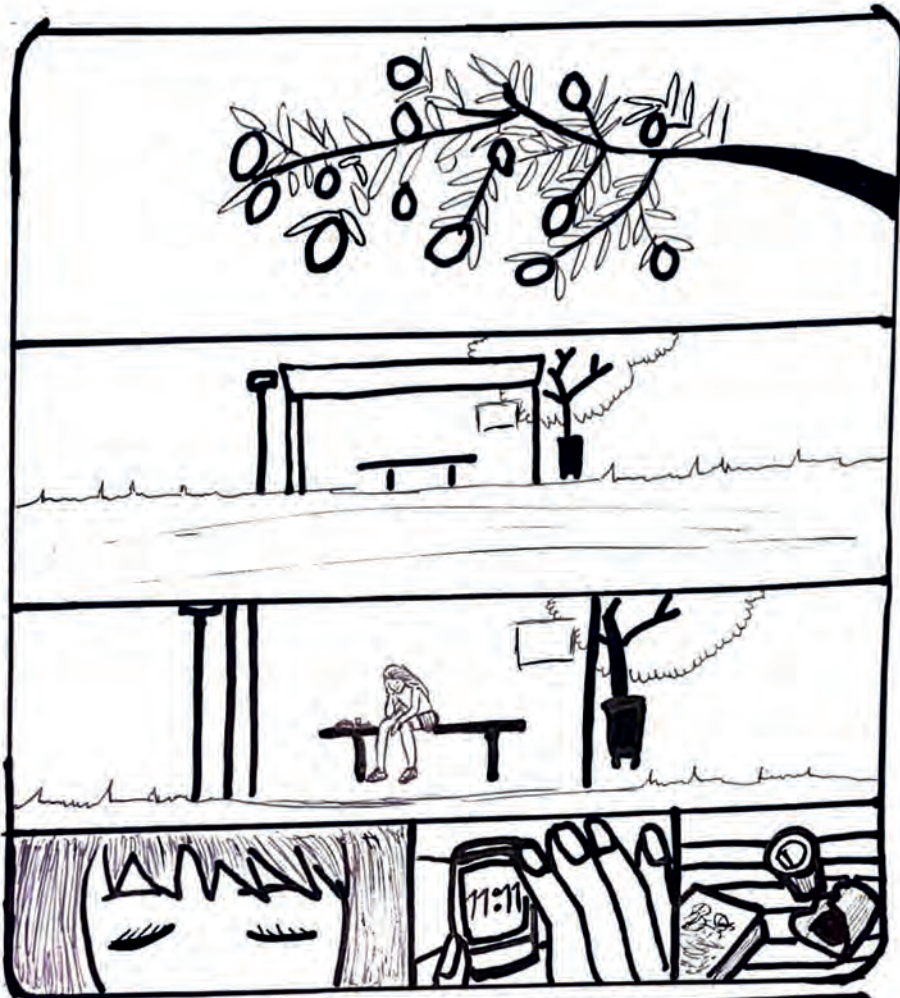






Feeding the crows was  
her way  
of finding solace.

As she watched these beautiful birds enjoy their food, she was reminded that life is a journey that requires patience —much like the slow and steady trust-building process with these feathered friends. She took comfort in the fact that tomorrow, she could count on the crows to eagerly await her arrival once again.



Summertime arrived, and it brought some changes with it. Like the famous Charles Darwin once said, "it's not always the strongest or smartest that make it through, but those who can adapt to change." Suu believed that the different seasons and astrological periods could actually help one grow as an individual.

Reflecting on significant life changes, such as resigning from job, relocating to new place, and confronting social challenges during her Saturn return phase, she realized that her ability to adapt was crucial for her survival. She also acknowledged that there are moments when all one can do is be patient and wait for the right time to make a move.

(\*\*\*Saturn completes one orbit around the sun in about 29.5 years, marking a Saturn Return. This occurs around your 29th or 59th birthday, when Saturn returns to the same position in the sky as it was during your birth. The Return lasts for roughly 2.5 to 3 years. It is known for causing significant disruptions in one's life.)

## The End



# A WEDNESDAY NIGHT IN Deb

Maryem Ben Salem



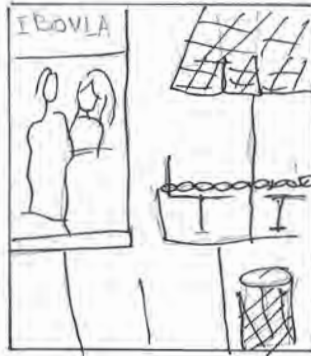
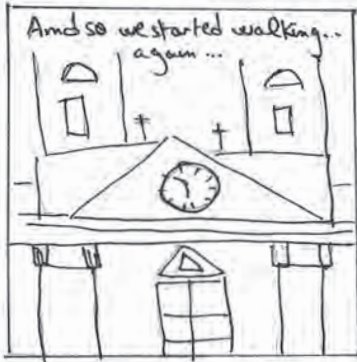












As we were walking, we came across a park...



Yeah! Let's play on the swings!

Shall we sit for a bit?

Let's stay here for a bit



We stayed at the park and talked for an hour.

14  
14.14



It was a fun night after all...

2024



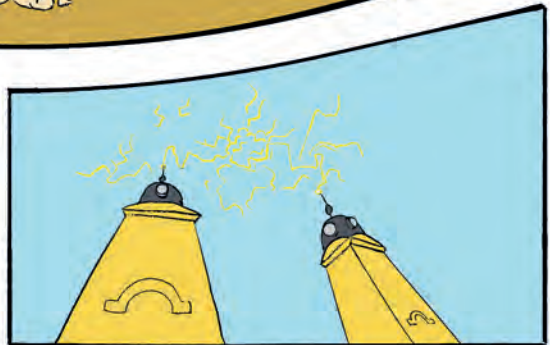
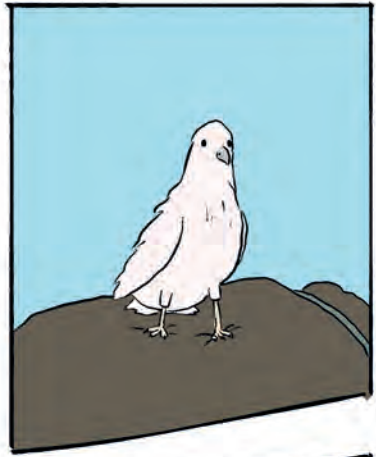
# Unfamiliar:

How quarantine felt

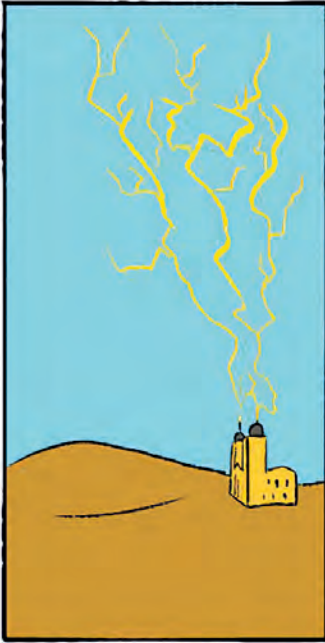
made by:

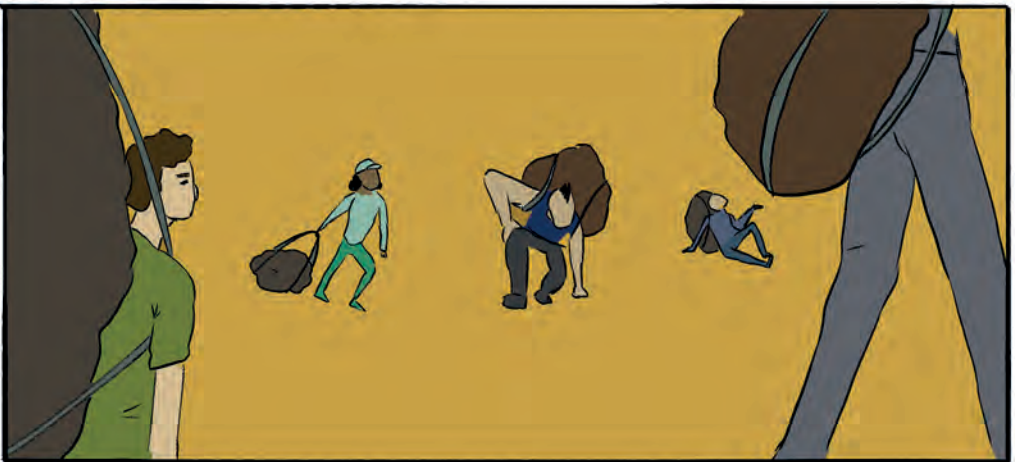
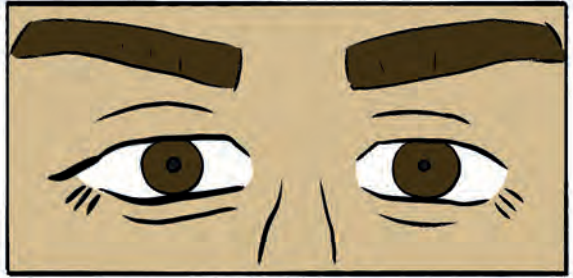
Kovács Aurél Márk









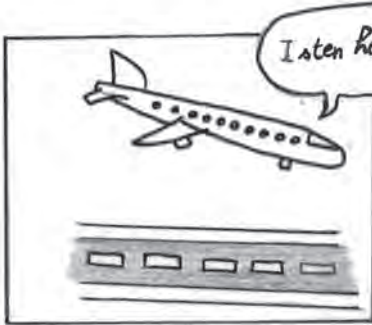






open heart ♡ open mind

BY HEND AVARI



Isten hozott Magyarországon

♡ PAPRIKA

HUNGARY

GOULASH



\* WELCOME TO HUNGARY

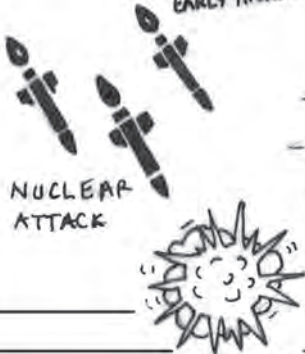


THIS IS LIKE A DREAM BEAUTIFUL AND PEACEFUL DEBRECEN. MY HOME AWAY FROM HOME ♡



# BREAKING NEWS

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN ANNOUNCED A MILITARY OPERATION IN UKRAINE EARLY THURSDAY...



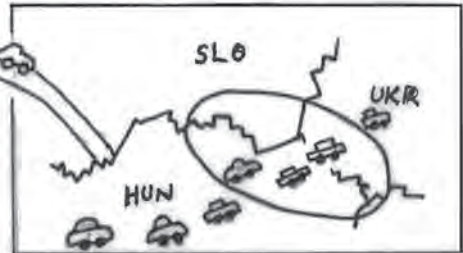
5:12 NEWS



EXPLOSIONS

CRISIS

BLASTS IN KYIV



UKRAINIANS FLED THEIR COUNTRY IN DROVES, CAUSING TRAFFIC JAMS AT BORDER CROSSINGS. MANY OF THEM BOUGHT REFUGE IN HUNGARY. MEANWHILE, IN DEBRECEN ...



CAMPUS HOTEL OR SARDINE HOTEL ?





# TRAUMA!

TUNISIA, 2011  
LIBYAN REVOLUTION

THIS IS NOT HAPPENING  
AGAIN !!!



"SHOULD I  
STAY  
OR  
SHOULD I  
GO"

THEY ARE HERE AS  
REFUGEES. THEY  
SHOULD BE GRATEFUL  
INSTEAD OF STEALING  
YOUR FOOD FROM THE  
COMMON KITCHEN

YOU SHOULD REPORT  
THEM. THEY ARE  
LOUD AND ANNOYING.  
THIS IS NOT YOUR DREAM  
OF A PEACEFUL LIFE.

WHY THEN? PEOPLE  
IN SYRIA AND YEMEN  
HAVE BEEN IN A  
STATE OF WAR  
SINCE 2011, AND  
NOBODY CARES

I NEED TO GET  
OUTTA HERE. THIS  
IS KILLING ME.  
MAYBE THE AME.  
CORNER IS THE  
LAST PLACE THESE  
PEOPLE WOULD  
THINK OF INVADING

THEY ARE YOUR  
BROTHERS AND  
THEY NEED YOUR  
HELP

REMEMBER  
THE VALUES  
OF LOVE AND  
COMPASSION  
THAT YOUR  
PARENTS  
TAUGHT YOU

REMEMBER:  
YOU ARE AN  
ALIEN TOO,  
YOU ARE IN  
NO POSITION  
TO BE

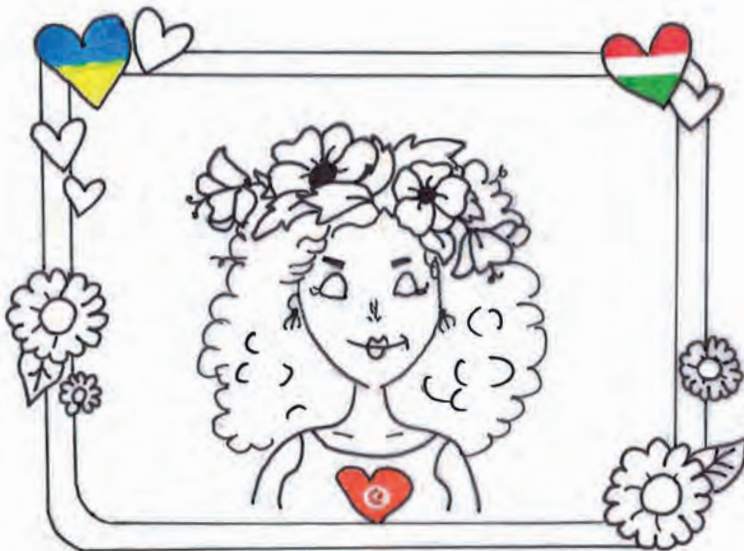
PUT YOURSELF  
IN THEIR SHOES.  
WHAT IF THIS  
HAPPENED TO YOU  
AND YOUR LOVED  
ONES?



BUT THE KIDS HAD DIFFERENT STORIES TO TELL ...

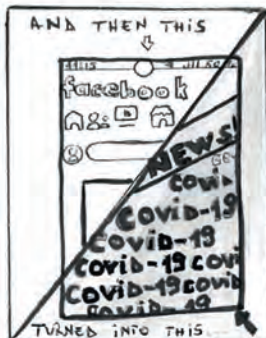




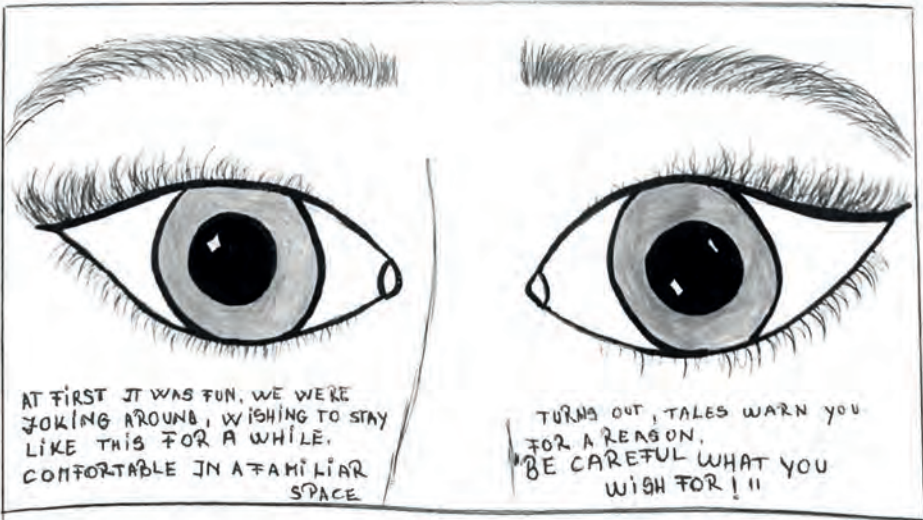


IF DEBRECEN IS BIG ENOUGH TO  
WELCOME INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS,  
IT IS BIG ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE.

# VIVIEN-B. BIRO



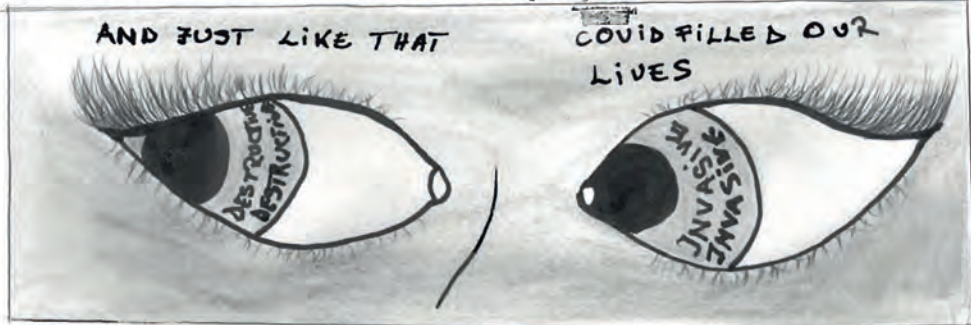
## 2 WEEKS LATER



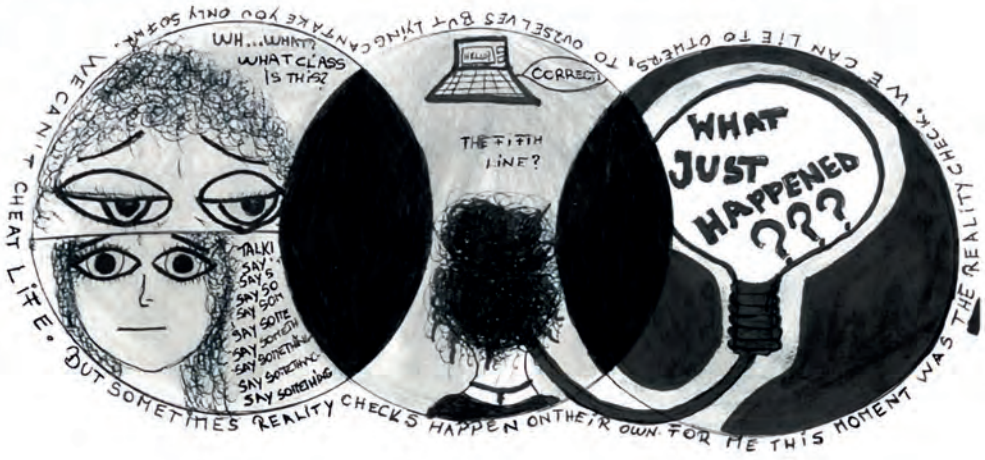
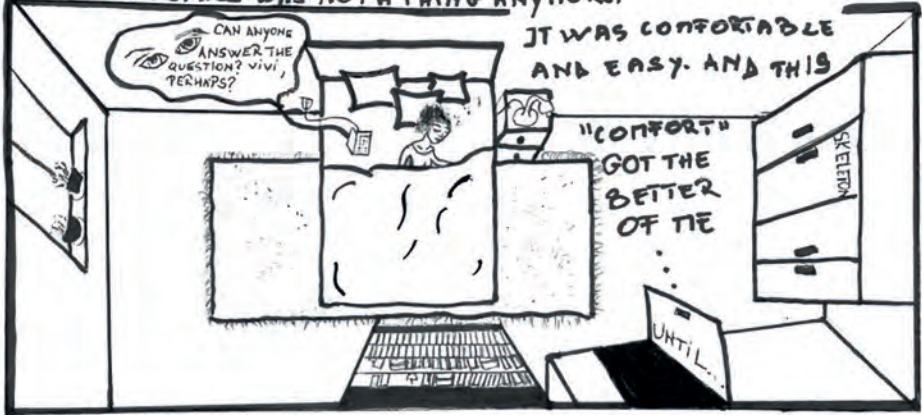


# 1 YEAR LATER

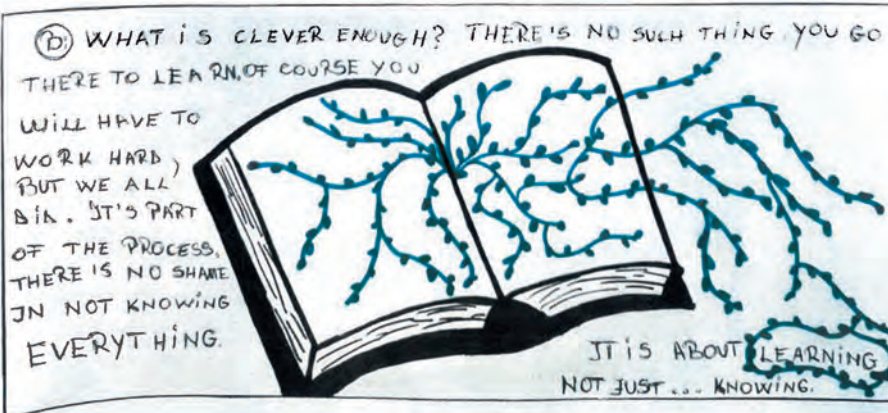
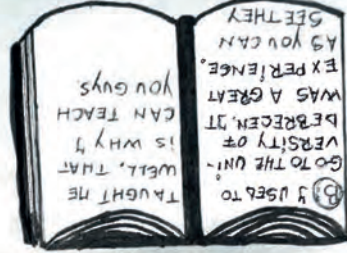
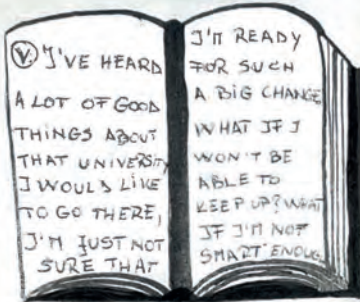
BECAUSE WISHES CAN COME TRUE



PERSONAL SPACE WAS NOT A THING ANYMORE.



▶▶ 2022  
BACK TO  
UNIVERSITY









I PACKED MY SUITCASE...

AND FINALLY, ON THE 20<sup>th</sup> OF AUGUST 2022...

I ARRIVED IN DEEREGEN

THE REST IS ANOTHER TALE...

THE END IS FAR...

TO BE CONTINUED

MS38



Isn't it too difficult?  
I didn't understand  
anything

by Aizirek Dzhakypbekova



ISN'T IT  
DIFFICULT?

AS your brain, I think  
you need time. It's  
manageable.

But as your soul. I have  
doubts. Will we be able  
to study here?

I said we need  
time!!!



I have still  
doubts

I don't have the  
energy to feel insecure  
I need to check elearning for  
tomorrow's class.



I didn't know that we needed to prepare for that class beforehand. I should have checked and consulted with someone.

Because of you, I felt uncomfortable during class. I had no idea what the class was about.



It's okay, we are new here. I will do my best from now on.

Yes, we need to catch up.



Did you see the news?

Yes, I hope it will stop soon.



When I see news about war I get stressed. What if war starts? Where will we go? Kyrgyzstan is far from Hungary.

Why are you overthinking? I know, it's not easy but there is no need to overreact and to be afraid. It's not up to us to stop the war!

Are you serious? You are heartless!





Do you remember when we were with a group in Eger city? The girl told me that she had difficulties at the beginning too, we are not the only ones who struggle.



Ahh, yes. I remember also when we met some international students at the Halloween party. They told the same I think, it is sometimes challenging..



Next week, we have a presentation. we need to prepare for that



Okay, I will try to help



Actually, I think, it is not difficult!! I noticed that after changing my study strategy. If I manage my time wisely, there will be good results.

Okay ^^



I think, we can handle it. We must stay strong



Last time I was struggling to buy meat. Because everything was written in Hungarian. A stranger woman helped me to translate. It was nice of her.

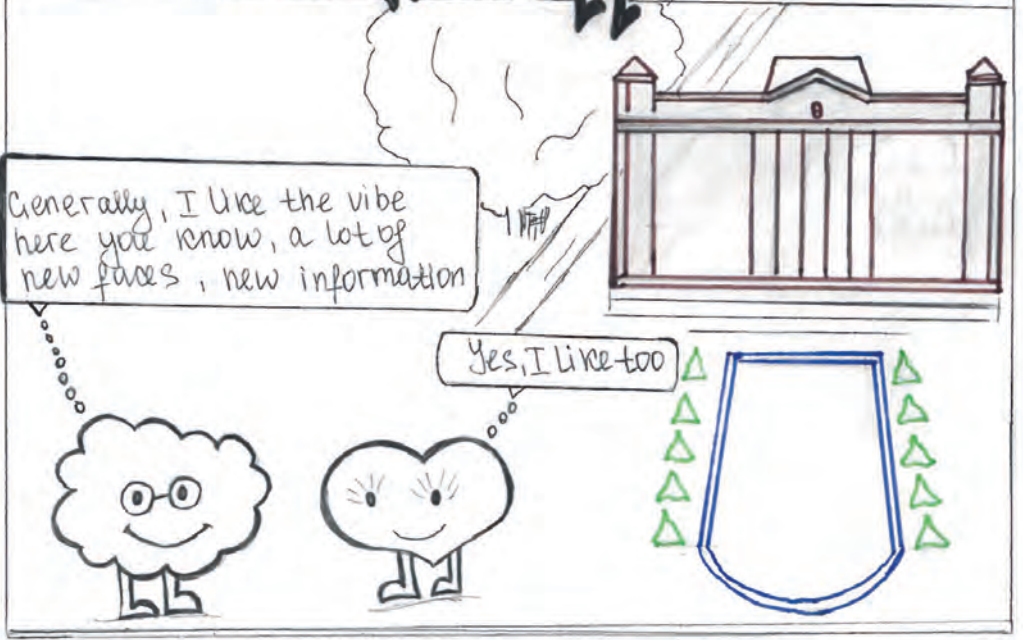
Ahh, yess. Generally, people are nice here in Debrecen.

MARKET COOP



My friend invited us to exercise at the stadium.

Okay!  
It will be fun.



Generally, I like the vibe here you know, a lot of new faces, new information

Yes, I like too











Sumyat Swezin is a PhD student and Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship awardee at the Department of British Studies of the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen, Hungary. She is a believer in living authentically and purposefully, and in the magical power of creative writing to touch hearts, broaden horizons, and mend broken spirits.



Debrecen-based aspiring cartoonist, Hend Ayari has been honing her skills for the past six weeks (4 days, 6 hours, and counting). Originally a PhD student from Tunisia, Hend blended her newly-found passion for the art with her research project about the power of storytelling in processing trauma, bringing the two areas into a playfully illustrated story of her experience as an international student in Debrecen.



Fruzsina Papp is a PhD student at the Institute of English and American Studies. Her primary interests are films, both in her research and as her hobby. She has published several short stories before, and has directed a short film titled *Atlanta*, which won first prize at the short film competition at the Fashion Festival Debrecen in 2018.



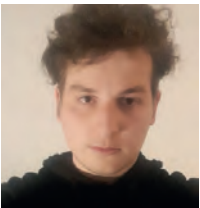
Fruzsina Benke is a first-year PhD student at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. She is interested in novels on the First World War, architecture and deeply personal stories on the human condition. She enjoys consuming and creating art in all forms and has been collecting *Garfield* comics since she was 7.



Vivien-Barbara Biró is currently a student at the University of Debrecen, American Studies MA program. Having moved to Debrecen recently, in August of 2022, her cartoon is built around the impacts of environmental change and other challenges.



Maksim Pelmegov is a PhD student at the University of Debrecen from Russia. While being part of the American Studies program, with this comic, he wanted to express relatable experiences of the international students at the university during the last 2-years as well as to explore one's personal relationship with memories and emotions both from the past and the present. Even though he is far from being a professional comic creator, he nevertheless hopes that the readers will enjoy the work and find something noteworthy or thought-provoking for themselves.



Aurél Márk Kovács was born in Budapest and now studies animation at Medgyessy Ferenc Gimnázium, in Debrecen. He has taken interest in several mediums of art, including multiple types of traditional and digital art, 3D animation, and modeling.



Aizirek Dzhakypbekova is a first-year MA student at the University of Debrecen where she is pursuing a degree in American Studies. She is from Kyrgyzstan. She enjoys traveling and hiking in her free time.



Maryem Ben Salem is a Tunisian student in the American Studies program at the University of Debrecen. She loves fantasy and writing stories. She also enjoys meeting people from different cultures.



Steven Fischer is the author of *There's a Blue Dog Under my Bed* and *The Wonderful, Happy, Cartoonish World of Steve & Bluey*. He served as Artist-in-Residence at Smith Farm for the Healing Arts in Washington, DC, helping cancer patients create cartoons that told the stories of their treatments. In 2003 he launched Cartoon Storytelling, an initiative in which cartooning is used to help participants of all ages heal from trauma. Over 10 collections have been produced from initiatives in Asia, Europe, and North America.



