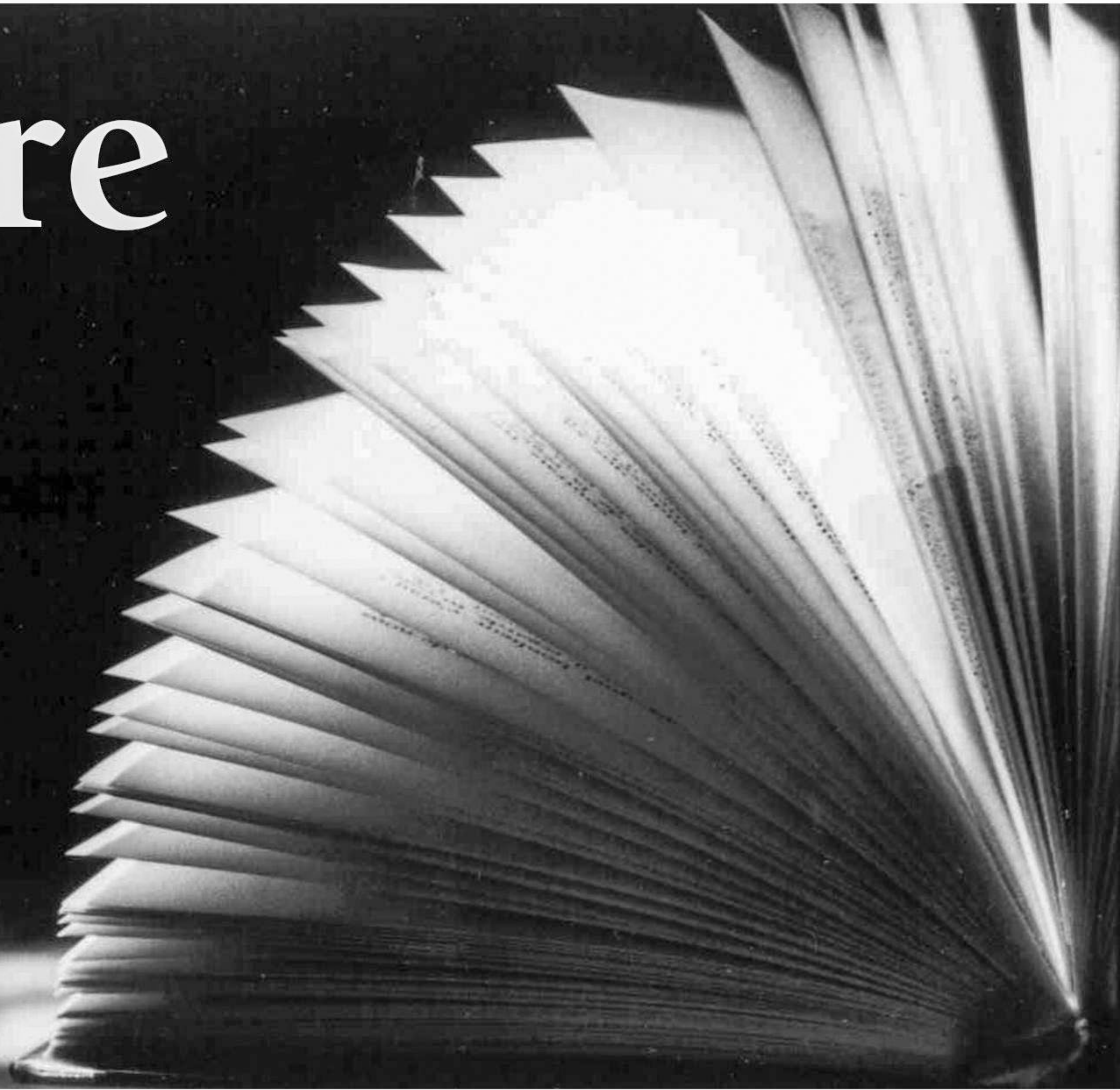


Before



MARISHA AZIZ

I am going to study today.

I used to be a pretty big nerd, before. I'd willingly spend time on education. Before, studying didn't seem so draining. Things are different now though, and they say having a personal goal helps. So my personal goal is to study.

I realise that I must decide on one particular subject to study. That's not going to be a problem, of course. I browse through my shelf. It doesn't feel like a Chemistry day today. I'm not feeling Physics, either. Maybe I should settle for some Biology. But then Biology reminds me of photosynthesis, and photosynthesis will definitely give me a headache. Come to think of it, my head already hurts, a little. Maybe I should get some rest.

I'm halfway to my bed before my earlier resolve kicks in. I am going to study today. I must, and I will. If not Physics, or Chemistry, or even Biology, I'll go for Mathematics. One can never go wrong with Mathematics, after all.

I pull out my books and notebooks and sit at my desk. The action seems to drain half of the energy out of my body. I absently wonder how people are able to carry out extensive manual labour on a daily basis when it's so taxing for me to walk three feet from my shelf to my table and take a seat.

I flip open to a chapter. *Differentiation*, yay. I stare at my pen for a while, but

every logical part of me knows it won't spring into action and do my work for me. I pick up the pen, finally. Its body is matte black, with the name of a luxury hotel printed along its side. I twirl it in my fingers – once, twice, three times – before remembering I can't possibly do maths without music.

I take 15 minutes to pick a song. I never had this trouble before. I'd be able to choose any song from my extensive playlist without too much thought. I'd sing along, making up lyrics at places where I didn't know the original ones. Before, I wouldn't constantly change the songs in search of one that might elicit a hum. Ha. "Before" had been a nice time.

I would've spent the entire night in search of a song I actually feel like listening to, but I am going to study now. So I set my phone aside and pick up my pen again. I stare at the numbers on my book, and the numbers stare back. I want to work with these numbers. I really, really do. I want to copy down this equation. I want to solve it, and feel that unparalleled satisfaction that I used to feel after cracking a difficult problem, before. But I don't want to, now. I can't really go back to "before". Or can I?

I look at the bottle of pills sitting at the corner of my table. It looks harmless enough.

"They'll help you," dad had told me.

"They'll make me fat," I countered.

"Would you rather be fat or have everyone call you crazy?"

"I think you're mixing up depression with schizo—"

"No I'm not. But people will. When they find out. They won't care why you went to a therapist. They'll all think you're crazy. They'll immediately assume you need to be shipped off to rehab."

Haha. My dad's a funny guy.

"I do not need antidepressants. I'm not depressed," I say out loud to my textbooks. And a small part of me probably believes it. No teenager loves to study. It's a fact. Sure, most don't sit at their table for hours with their brains craving education but simply not having the energy or motivation to carry that out. But that doesn't make it depression. Depression is serious business.

Having established to myself and my textbooks that I do not need antidepressants, I start to study. I copy the equation onto my notebook.

Suddenly, I'm feeling Physics. A part of me really wants to get to know electromagnetism in minute detail. But I know that'll get me nowhere. I am going to study, I'm going to solve this problem, and I'm going to do it now. Right after I check social media.

I open the app, with a curious sense of anticipation. Of course there are no notifications. I barely talk to people, or post things. The few people who do text never get replies. So why do I expect notifications? Why am I scrolling down a newsfeed that I know contains nothing I feel even the slightest bit of interest

towards? What am I looking for? Attention? Validation?

This mystery will have to wait, however, as a quick glance at the clock tells me I have spent an hour staring at my phone. My thumb hurts from all the scrolling. I set my phone aside once more and begin to differentiate my equation.

It feels like a small victory when I realise I've written out three lines. I can see a solution taking shape. I'm waiting for that sense of control and purpose to kick in. I'm waiting to feel a twinge of that joy, but I don't. Or maybe I would've, if I'd struggled through a few more lines like my brain is screaming at me to. But I can't.

I look again at the bottle. Maybe I am depressed. Maybe a sick, twisted, insensitive part of me likes being depressed. This makes a laugh escape my lips, a hollow sound that echoes through my room. I'm almost as funny as my dad, sometimes.

My traitorous body gets up from my chair. My eyes fill with tears. Why am I crying? I tell my brain to calm down; the tears don't stop. They're aggravating my headache. I think I need a nap.

I am going to study. Tomorrow.

Despite being a hopeless fangirl, Marisha Aziz lives under delusions of awesomeness. Contact her at marisha.aziz@gmail.com to give her another excuse to ignore her teetering pile of life problems.