

Partial Eclipse

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Marcus tilted the telescope toward the sky. He carefully looked through the eyepiece, and adjusted the focus so that the sun was smack in the middle of the lens like a bright, burning pupil. The first solar eclipse in years was about to darken the skies of Bloomfield, in the middle of a sunny Saturday afternoon, and Marcus wasn't going to miss it for the world.

He'd firmly planted the telescope tripod in the earth a few yards from the edge of the baseball diamond, not far from where his high school's junior varsity team was warming up for a game. Technically he was in the outfield, but the grass became wet and mushy further out in the park. Severe thunderstorms had nearly flooded every basement in town that week, but thankfully the sun came out again on the day of the eclipse.

A few geese had migrated from a nearby pond and squatted at the edge of the field. They flapped restlessly. Marcus knew animals had a sixth sense about nature's movements, and wondered whether the geese were aware the sun would soon be stamped out from the sky.

As the JV players tossed pitches back and forth and practiced sliding into first base, Marcus did his best to ignore them. Yet he couldn't help but watch as they torqued their pitching arms back and let the balls go whizzing forth, then land

softly in the cushion of a catcher's mitt. So what if he hadn't made the baseball team? Anyone could swing a bat, but not everyone could stare at the heavens and decipher the movement of planets. Thanks to his geometry teacher, Marcus finally felt like he was better at something than everyone else.

He thought back to Thursday's geometry class, when Mr. Baker had turned the lesson into an impromptu astronomy lecture. He'd even brought in an old telescope and was explaining the power of its usage.

"Eclipses are all about parabolas and angles," he'd explained. Half the class yawned as Mr. Baker waxed on about the elliptical shape of earth's orbit and the penumbra and umbra—concentric circles of dark shadows created by an eclipse. Even though they'd had an official astronomy unit in fifth grade, by high school, most of his peers couldn't even recall what a solar eclipse was. That's when Marcus got annoyed. He raised his hand, but spoke without being called on.

"Don't you remember? It's when the moon passes between the sun and earth. So the moon blocks the sun, which means that light can't get to earth, so a certain area of the earth will get dark as night in the middle of the day. Well, in this case only semi-dark. It's a partial eclipse," he said knowingly.

Taylor, the girl sitting in front of him, turned around and gave him a dirty look.

"What's your problem?" he whispered to her under his breath. He didn't know why he said it. He was secretly glad she even looked at him.

Marcus didn't understand why people seemed to find him annoying because he was smart. He wasn't trying to show off or anything. He was genuinely interested in learning just about everything, which was why he'd spend his lunch period talking to Mr. Baker.

"I'm glad at least one of my students takes an interest in the finer points of geometry—no pun intended," said Mr. Baker. "Marcus, if you promise to be

careful, I'll let you borrow the telescope this weekend. An eclipse is an incredible sight with this level of magnification."

For once, Marcus didn't have anything to say—besides thank you. He nodded heartily and watched as Mr. Baker pulled the tripod out from behind his desk. Even though there was a box for the telescope, Marcus wrapped the delicate instrument in his hooded sweatshirt and held it protectively to his chest. He felt like he was harboring an important secret.

When he walked out of the classroom, Taylor was standing by the lockers, staring off into space. Her music was playing so loudly that he could hear it pulsing from her ear buds.

"What's in your sweatshirt?" she asked suspiciously, as she took out her headphones.

Marcus felt his cheeks grow warm. He probably did look ridiculous, cradling a telescope like a newborn.

"It's nothing. Just something that Mr. Baker let me take home."

"It's not that telescope, is it?" she asked.

Marcus nodded meekly.

"That's cool," she said. "But you know there's a smartphone app that calculates the circumference of both solar and lunar eclipses, right?"

No, thought Marcus. He didn't know. He didn't have a smartphone.

"Who cares?" he told Taylor. His words came out harsher than he'd intended. Taylor put her ear buds back in her ears.

“I’m going to ignore you now,” she said matter-of-factly.

Marcus thought back to the moment by the lockers as he stood in the field, and began the five-minute-countdown until the eclipse. He wished, for a moment, that Taylor was there with him. An eclipse seemed so momentous, so awe-inspiring, it seemed a shame not to have anyone to share the experience with. No one else seemed to think it was anything more than a distraction. He glanced at the bleachers filling with parents and younger siblings, fans and groupies, all bubbling with anticipation for the big game. Marcus pushed the thought out of his head and checked the time on his boring old phone. Two minutes left.

“Attention in the outfield!” Coach Bernardi’s booming voice echoed through a loudspeaker, and jolted Marcus out of his reverie.

Bernardi was waving his arms wildly above his head, trying to get his team members to pay attention.

“Due to a solar eclipse, the game will be delayed approximately 30 minutes. I repeat: the JV baseball game will be delayed 30 minutes due to a solar eclipse.”

The team stopped for moment, collectively shrugged, and then returned to whatever they’d been doing before.

Marcus was so distracted he hardly realized the eclipse had begun. He snapped back to watch a black crescent as thin as a fingernail begin inching its way in front of the sun. Marcus tried to look directly at it, but he couldn’t, without squinting.

As soon as he looked at the sky up-close through the telescope, the world around him went quiet. The moon crept on, covering a quarter and then nearly half of the sun. In mere minutes, the sky darkened. The sudden change felt odd and eerie, like a celestial power was using a remote control to shift the moon across the sky. But Marcus wasn’t scared. He felt excitement surge through him, right down to his toes. This is what I’ve been waiting for, he thought.

Marcus hardly blinked. He felt instantly transported high up into the heavens, floating across the clouds. The remaining crescent of sun was blazing while the moon seemed to be moving faster and faster. Then the darkness of the moon appeared closer and closer. Closer and closer until Marcus realized he was no longer looking at the moon, but something else fast-moving and round. He heard a startling crack. The telescope jolted and the eyepiece pressed hard against his socket. Marcus fell backwards onto his behind.

It was over before he realized what had happened. Marcus scrambled to his feet and held tightly to the tripod. When he looked through the eyepiece again, he only saw jagged shards. The lens was broken. Marcus began combing through the grass, searching frantically for whatever pieces of glass he could recover. That's when he came across the baseball.

"How could you do this to me?" he yelled at no one in particular. He grabbed the baseball and slammed it into the earth. What idiot had thrown a baseball at him? Then he picked up the ball again and headed toward the diamond. By that point, Marcus had all but forgotten about the eclipse.

His stomach lurched as he thought about telling Mr. Baker what had happened. Sure, it wasn't his fault, but he had positioned the telescope just so. He'd set up in a baseball field and been so focused, he failed to notice an object heading toward him, even as he looked right at it. He should've been quicker, faster, better. But he wasn't skilled enough to make the team, and he certainly wasn't fast enough to avoid the assault.

As Marcus stepped onto the baseball field, he realized he was the only one moving. Fans and players all stood still as statues, their hands shading their eyes as they squinted into the light. There was still a sliver of sunshine remaining, but to Marcus, the moment felt like the depths of night.

Marcus squeezed the baseball in his hand and lifted it above his shoulder. It didn't matter whom he threw it at. He just needed a target, someone who—

“Hey man, you okay?” Marcus hardly noticed the first baseman jogging toward him. “Did I do that? Did we?” he asked, looking at the telescope. “Bummer.”

“Well, I certainly didn’t do it myself,” said Marcus.

“It...uh...was an accident. I guess we kind of weren’t paying enough attention, with the eclipse happening and all. It’s pretty awesome, isn’t it?”

With that, they both looked back up at the sky. Marcus softened. He was tired of getting wrapped up in petty problems when there were plenty of things in life that were far more important. He knew accidents happened. So much was beyond his control.

“Yeah,” he said to the first baseman. “The eclipse is unbelievable.”

Heads craning toward the sky, they watched together as the moon blanketed the sun. And then, minutes later, they looked on as the moon moved past, letting the Saturday afternoon sun shine bright, once again.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the passage, what is a solar eclipse?

- A A solar eclipse is when the moon passes between the sun and the earth, blocking the light of the sun.
- B A solar eclipse is when the sun is focused in the middle of a telescope's lens so that it shines like a bright, burning pupil.
- C A solar eclipse is when severe thunderstorms cause the sun to be hidden for several days at a time.
- D A solar eclipse is when an object such as the sun or moon appears larger because it is viewed through a telescope.

2. What is the climax of the action in this story?

- A Taylor tells Marcus about a smartphone app that calculates the circumference of eclipses.
- B A baseball hits the telescope Marcus is using to watch the solar eclipse.
- C Mr. Baker offers to let Marcus borrow his telescope to watch the eclipse.
- D The baseball game is delayed for 30 minutes because of the solar eclipse.

3. During a solar eclipse, the moon prevents sunlight from getting to earth.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

- A "The moon crept on, covering a quarter and then nearly half of the sun. In mere minutes, the sky darkened."
- B "Marcus didn't understand why people seemed to find him annoying because he was smart."
- C "Marcus thought back to the moment by the lockers as he stood in the field, and began the five-minute-countdown until the eclipse."
- D "He carefully looked through the eyepiece, and adjusted the focus so that the sun was smack in the middle of the lens like a bright, burning pupil."

4. How do Marcus's feelings change after the first baseman comes over and talks to him?

- A His feelings change from happiness to disappointment.
- B His feelings change from confidence to confusion.
- C His feelings change from anger to acceptance.
- D His feelings change from curiosity to fear.

5. What is a theme of this story?

- A Using a smartphone app to calculate the circumference of an eclipse is more fun than watching an eclipse through a telescope.
- B Some things in life are more important than others, and it is not worth getting upset over the little things.
- C Playing baseball is more important than being good at geometry.
- D Telescopes can teach people a lot about the movement of the moon.

6. Read the following sentences: "So the moon blocks the sun, which means that light can't get to earth, so a certain area of the earth will get dark as night in the middle of the day. Well, in this case only semi-dark. It's a **partial** eclipse," he said knowingly."

What does the word **partial** mean in the sentence above?

- A long-lasting
- B bright green
- C dangerous
- D not complete

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Marcus shows an interest in astronomy; _____, Mr. Baker lets him borrow his telescope to watch the eclipse.

- A therefore
- B previously
- C in contrast
- D especially

8. What happens to the telescope after the baseball hits it?

9. After the first baseman comes over, Marcus softens. The author writes that Marcus “was tired of getting wrapped up in petty problems when there were plenty of things in life that were far more important.” Give an example of a petty, or unimportant, problem in Marcus’s life and explain what makes it petty, using evidence from the story.

10. Reread the quotation in the question above. Give an example of something in Marcus’s life that is “far more important” than a petty problem. Explain what makes it important, using evidence from the story.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 910

1. According to the passage, what is a solar eclipse?

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8. What happens to the telescope after the baseball hits it?

Suggested answer: The lens of the telescope breaks.

9. After the first baseman comes over, Marcus softens. The author writes that Marcus "was tired of getting wrapped up in petty problems when there were plenty of things in life that were far more important." Give an example of a petty, or unimportant, problem in Marcus's life and explain what makes it petty, using evidence from the story.

Suggested answer: Students may point out such problems as the telescope breaking and Marcus not making the baseball team. Next to the experience of watching the solar eclipse with another person, these problems seem petty to Marcus.

10. Reread the quotation in the question above. Give an example of something in Marcus's life that is "far more important" than a petty problem. Explain what makes it important, using evidence from the story.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary, but students will likely cite the experience of watching a solar eclipse with the first baseman as an example of something that is "far more important" than a petty problem. For Marcus, the eclipse is an "awe-inspiring" experience that he wants to share with another person. Doing so helps him put his everyday frustrations in perspective.