

Edward's cereal bowl hit the floor and shattered; milk and soggy flakes splashed his jeans. Edward jumped up, frowned, and looked around, reminding himself of where he was. *Right.* He was in the kitchen—old-fashioned red laminate counters, bright white farm-style sink, retro fridge and stove, smells of ripening bananas and the alfalfa his mom put in her “energy smoothie”—he'd been eating breakfast until he got lost in his book. He looked down and stared at the remains of his bowl.

“Edward, you have to be more careful!” his mom snapped.

Edward glanced at her. His mom looked harried, as usual. A few auburn strands had come loose from the twist she always wore her hair in. She was shaking her head and rubbing her temples as she stared at the mess on the scuffed hardwood floor.

“How'd that get down there?” Edward asked.

His mom sighed. She leaned over and started

picking up pieces of green stoneware. Edward bent over to help her . . . and their heads bumped together.

“Ow!” they shouted in unison.

His mother straightened and scowled at him. In one hand, she held the stoneware shards. She used the other hand to probe the red spot on her forehead.

Edward opened his mouth to apologize, but a look from his mother silenced him. She walked to the trash can under the sink and dropped in the broken cereal bowl. Edward grabbed a napkin from the round kitchen table, squatted, and started wiping up the milk and cereal.

“Edward.”

His mom held out a wet rag for him to use on the floor. He took it and started swiping it this way and that. His swift motions flung bits of cereal farther across the floor.

His mom sighed again. “Just leave it. I’ll get it. Go brush your teeth. You’re going to miss the bus.”

Edward stood and seized the moment to apologize. “Sorry. I don’t know how that bowl fell.”

His mom opened her mouth, closed it, took a deep breath, and then reached out and ruffled his hair. He squirmed. He wished she wouldn’t do that. It was like she couldn’t tell the difference between *eighth grade* and *eight*. She still tried to treat him like a little kid, even though he’d been thirteen for months. He was a *teenager* now. He needed her to get that.

He looked at her tight face. Now probably wasn’t the best time to try to explain it, though.

Edward and his mom had been on their own for a long time, and for the most part, they were close. They looked alike, too, which could be embarrassing. Even with the subtle makeup his mom wore, her hazel eyes, small nose, wide mouth, and strong jaw were almost mirror images of his own features. It was uncanny. His hair was the exact color of hers, too—but his hair wasn’t long enough to twist.

“Well, my little science geek,” his mom said, “what was that question you were asking the other day about unstoppable forces?”

“What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object? That question?” Edward scrunched up his face. What did the irresistible force paradox have to do with anything?

His mom nodded. “That one. Well, I can’t answer it. But I do know what happens when a cereal bowl pushed to the edge of the table meets the elbow of an inattentive

boy who is reading at breakfast instead of eating.”

“Not a boy,” Edward said.

“Fine. Teen. Same result. You need to focus on one thing at a time, Edward. You get in a hurry, and that’s why you’re so prone to accidents. If you want to live through your teen years, you need to *pay attention*.”

“Well, I was *paying attention* to what I was reading,” Edward said.

“That’s not—” His mom sighed again. “Go pay attention to brushing your teeth.”

Edward shrugged and turned to leave the kitchen.

“Your book?” his mother said.

“Oh.” He turned and took it from her. She shook her head and smiled at him in the lopsided way she had whenever he messed something up. It was like she was saying, “You’re a hopeless case, but I love you anyway.”

Edward hesitated, then hugged his mom. “Sorry.”

“Edward, are you listening?”

Edward looked up at Mrs. Sterling, who frowned at him from the front of his eighth-grade science class.

“Sorry?”

“I asked if you could please grab the iron filings from the cabinet. You’re the closest to it.”

“Oh. Sure.” Edward turned around and opened the metal cabinet behind him. They’d been talking about the whole unstoppable force/immovable object thing again at the start of class today, and his brain couldn’t stop chewing on it. Thanks to his many questions about

it, Mrs. Sterling had assigned a paper on the subject. He thought about how he was going to organize his essay while he grabbed the filings.

“Okay, so now we’re going to witness the power of magnets,” Mrs. Sterling announced.

She beamed at the class. Mrs. Sterling was middle-aged with a round face and a wide smile. She always looked like she was having the time of her life, even when she wasn’t. She presided like a game show host over the classroom, which was full of desks, lab tables, and cabinets of vials and beakers. Charts, diagrams, and photos of scientific anomalies littered the walls—an endless number of distractions for Edward’s curious mind.

“Edward, since you’re up here,” Mrs. Sterling said, “why don’t you sprinkle those filings on that magnet?” She pointed to a flat gray boxlike contraption on her desk before turning away to write something on the blackboard.

He tried to see what she was writing while he opened the vial he’d grabbed, and, without looking, sprinkled a mound of filings on the flat surface.

“Thank you, Edward,” Mrs. Sterling said. “You can return to your seat.”

Edward nodded and headed back to his desk.

“Okay, here we go.” She flipped the switch on a fan that was set up in front of the magnet.

Suddenly, the front of the class was pelted with tiny black particles . . . and everyone started to sneeze.