Humbled Heights

HUMBLED HEIGHTS

Your AI-angel plays God. And you can't log out.

Written and conceived by Timmy Tesch

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English Translation by Timmy Tesch & Bianca Marvillier

Editorial Review: Adele Rose, Nick Weremeychik & Virginia Brooke

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Dedicated to everyone who has ever felt lost
in the shadow of others.

Prologue

Review from the monthly magazine *Noblesseul*, March 15, 2016
by **Edward Borghman**, culinary critic and long-suffering victim

"Le Petit Bateau Blanc"
12 Passage des Têtes Levées
75003 Paris

Upon entering the supposedly exclusive *Le Petit Bateau Blanc*, described in its brochures as *"an intimate culinary beacon in the heart of Paris,"* I quickly suspected that this little white boat has no compass. Or crew. What follows is an account of gastronomic misery, served with a bow and a disgraceful bill.

The interior…
First impressions matter. Second impressions make you uneasy. This place feels as if someone armed with a credit card and a Pinterest account tried to create a "maritime chic" atmosphere - but with the aesthetic sensibility of a drunk fisherman. White fake (!) linen curtains drooped sadly against the windows, the chairs looked like a cross between Louis XVI and an IKEA clearance sale. The only thing that truly felt nautical was the mild seasickness I got from the wobbly tables.

The lighting…
Flickering LED candles that instantly murdered any trace of romance. As if you were dining inside a medical refrigerator.

The staff…
The service - a procession of lumbering waiters with the elegance of freshly washed cauliflower - moved about as if they were serving time in a labor camp. Questions about the menu were answered hesitantly, accompanied by raised eyebrows and a fake smile with the credibility of a plastic oven dish. Our waiter, François (according to his name tag), gave the word *reluctant* a whole new meaning. When I asked whether the veal was organic, he made a disastrous attempt at humor: *"Sir, the animal is dead anyway. What difference does it make?"* The only person who found this funny was himself. Appalling.

The menu…
And then the food. Or rather: the parade of culinary incompetence. The appetizers arrived after 37 (!) minutes - it felt as though they first had to go search for a mussel in Normandy.

My *"amuse-bouche à la truffe noire de l'ombre éternelle"* turned out to be a cold piece of toast with a shaving of truffle so small I had to zoom in with my iPhone. It was probably just dirt. A marginal effort at best.

Next: *Demi-filet of veal, mystical wine reduction, and Jerusalem artichoke foam.*
Excuse me?

What I received was a pitiful piece of veal that tasted as though it had given up its life for the wrong order. Dry. Tough. The "reduction" was no more than a discolored smear on the plate,

and the “foam” bore an alarming resemblance to shaving cream. A culinary absurdity of epic proportions.

The so-called *“hand-rolled gnocchi with saffron from Kashmir”* looked suspiciously like a joke freshly thawed from the freezer.

Dessert…
A “deconstruction of mille-feuille with a hint of lavender.” A hint? An overload - so intense it made the dessert taste like something entirely different. A public service announcement to the staff: the hand soaps in the restroom need refilling!

The bill…
Three courses, two glasses of wine (Pic Saint-Loup from a questionable vintage), one bottle of sparkling water, and a deeply misplaced espresso.
Grand total: **€417.60!**

Final verdict…
Le Petit Bateau Blanc is not a restaurant; it is a lesson in pretension. A vessel without a course, whose culinary star seems to have been fished out of a grab bag. Shame. Incompetence. Unfiltered hospitality idiocy - wrapped in a bow. Avoid it if you have even a shred of self-respect. Or respect for your taste buds. And your bank account.

1/5

One single *Noblesseul* star, awarded solely for the correctly folded napkins. This is one boat I'll gladly let sail away - I'd rather swim!

Noblesseul – We taste it, so you don't have to!

PART ONE:

The Name Is Edward...

February 1995

It was in February 1995 that Edward first came into contact with Lisette. He had known of her already - you couldn't exactly miss her - but he had never planned on even speaking to her.

Thursday nights were traditionally a drinking-and-poker night for "the boys," held at someone's dorm room. It ranged from excessively terrorizing their bodies with outrageously expensive whiskey and matching cigars - waiting to see who would drop first - to drunken poker games involving sometimes ridiculously large sums of money. Most nights ended, if the loser couldn't or wouldn't pay, in a very tasteless dare.

That evening, Samuel Levi (nicknamed "the Jew," son of a prominent Antwerp diamond dealer), Bram Bertrant (nicknamed "Biter," because of his wide, impressive dental arch and his background in an extremely wealthy business family), Alain-Philippe (shortened to "Alf," blue blood with obscenely rich parents), and Edward were once again playing poker together.

For show, they liked to call it "the bet," as if they were in a real casino movie, but in reality it was just the stake. And as always, the later the night, the higher it climbed. When only Alain-Philippe and Edward still felt like playing one final hand - while the others, half drunk and bored, looked on - the ante,

the mandatory stake for both players, had risen to one hundred thousand Belgian francs. Or, back then, about three thousand dollars.

Edward cursed like a nun stepping on a Lego brick during prayer when he realized that, contrary to what he'd thought, he didn't have the best cards at all - and had lost. Now what? He had no intention of slaughtering his piggy bank, so...

After a lot of drunken talk and stupid babbling, Alf suggested converting the amount once again into a challenge of his own choosing.

Samuel had once, to loud applause, shaved off his own eyebrows and replaced them with a rather ridiculous version drawn on with an indelible marker. The previous time Alain-Philippe had lost and refused to pay even a single franc, they had forced him to shave a strip of his pubic hair and smoke it - rolled up like a joint.

So Edward's debt, once again to roaring applause, was converted into a "dare."

The boys would randomly select a woman somewhere in or around the building, whom Edward would be required to hit on and then talk into bed. Naturally, they wouldn't choose an approachable candidate - the more eccentric, the better.

Just then, Lisette N'yadeeh came wobbling past the building. Almost everything about this young woman felt like a

misunderstanding to the boys. She was tall – imposing, even – well over three hundred pounds, and dressed as if she were released blindfolded into a thrift store every morning. It seemed she genuinely couldn't care less. She had no notable friends and the social charm of a cactus. At a young age, she had come to Belgium from Kambara as a political refugee with her mother. In the meantime, she had learned to dig in, to fight if necessary, just to survive – and that worked in her favor. Sitting around feeling sorry for herself was not her style.

"*There!*" Samuel shouted. "*That colossus – you've got to take her!*"
The boys laughed their heads off.
"*Yes! We have a winner!*" Alf yelled. "*Her – or pay up!*"

Edward managed a strained smile.

"*You've got an advantage – her vagina stinks only when you lift the lid!*" Bram said, referring to her heavy overhanging belly.
"*A pussy with a lid!*" Samuel howled.

Edward, suddenly a bit sobered up, knew there was no talking his way out of this. He walked down the stairs and out of the building, following Lisette. When he was a few yards behind her, he called out, "*Uh... miss*?"

Lisette completely ignored him and kept walking. Carefully, he walked alongside her and tried again.
"*I need to talk to you!*"

She still stared straight ahead, maintaining the same unhurried pace. Edward kept pace beside her. Eventually, she glanced sideways, bored, and said, *"Leave me alone."*

Edward cautiously took her by the arm.
"No, really, I need to... uh... ask you something."

"Want me to punch you in your stupid face?" she snapped. *"Go fuck yourself! Get your hands off me, asshole!"*

Edward was startled by how foul-mouthed she turned out to be.

"Interested in making a little money in a few minutes?" Edward asked softly.

"Want me to fall on top of you, you little dickwad?" Lisette shot back. *"What is this - did you lose some stupid bet? With those rich-kid friends of yours?"*

He couldn't stop her from glancing over his shoulder and seeing the boys laughing behind the blinds of his dorm room on the third floor.

"Something like that..." Edward said quietly.
"A thousand francs to spend fifteen minutes pretending we're... going somewhere together," he tried gently. He suspected she could use any extra cash.
"A thousand francs just to pretend for a bit - you don't get offers like that every day!"

To his great surprise, she suddenly said, *"Five thousand, dickhead!"*

"Two thousand!" Edward countered.

"Yeah, good evening," she said, lifting her chin slightly and walking past him.

"Okay! Five thousand then..." Edward stammered a few seconds later. He realized it was still cheaper than a hundred thousand. *"And... I'll bring it to you tomorrow evening!"*

"NO. No. To humiliate myself like this and even pretend I'd want to fuck you, I want five thousand cash - HERE AND NOW. Pay up front, boy. Not tomorrow."

He knew there was no arguing with her.
"Okay then..." he said softly.

"Pretending," she laughed. *"We can go to my room, but if you so much as lay a finger on me, I'll break it into little pieces, moron."*

"I don't have that much cash on me," Edward said, *"but I can run to an ATM real quick."*

"All right," Lisette said calmly. *"Five thousand... let's see..."* She theatrically bent her arm and glanced at the large watch on her wrist. *"Fifteen minutes. My room. Block C, room 002."*

She walked on without looking back.

Edward crossed the street to the ATM around the corner, giving the boys a thumbs-up. By now, they'd attracted a few more spectators; some girls had come over because of the cheering upstairs. "*Going to grab some condoms!*" he shouted, laughing.

Thirteen minutes later, Edward knocked softly twice on the door of room 002, ground floor of Block C.

Lisette opened the door immediately and let him into her small dorm room. It was sweltering hot and reeked of freshly sprayed deodorant. Everything suggested she'd cleaned up in a hurry. The only light came from two large flickering computer screens, filled with thousands of numbers and letters.

"*So, what's all this? What do you do here?*" Edward asked.

"*The five thousand. Hand it over,*" she said, holding out her hand.

He shut off his brain and, reluctantly, gave her the bills. She folded them quickly and slid them under her keyboard.

"*Well then... what a desperate loser you are! Guess that's it. Have a nice evening,*" she laughed.

He genuinely felt like an idiot.

"*I figure for five thousand I can at least stand here for a bit, right?*" he snapped.

"*Stand? You can stand - or sit on the floor, if you like. I don't have an extra chair. But don't you dare sit on my bed or I'll break your nose!*"

Her bed was tightly and neatly made. Not a wrinkle in the brightly colored comforter with the half-faded print of The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. A Belgian flag hung on the wall. Beneath it, a row of old, faded Polaroids clipped to a string. Most of them showed an older Black woman.

"*Who's this?*" Edward asked.

"*None of your business, white shit,*" Lisette said.

She dropped into the ancient but surprisingly comfortable desk chair, draped with a blanket to hide the worn, bald patches. It creaked under the enormous weight it carried. An awkward silence filled the room.

Lisette ignored Edward and sighed at one of the two large monitors, where a bright orange cursor blinked on a dark screen. After a moment she suddenly said,
"*You probably think I'm the cleaning lady here? While you and your friends party and screw empty-headed dolls, I'm sitting here, slowly but surely changing the world.*"

She typed relentlessly as she spoke.

"*You know... I honestly don't give a damn what you do or say or think about me,*" she continued calmly, smiling broadly.

Edward had sobered up significantly by now.
"*No one knows anything about you - that's why everyone makes*

up weird shit about you. You don't make any effort to connect or even talk to people!"

She suddenly turned and frowned at him.

"I don't feel like it! Or rather - I don't want to waste a single second of my precious time on empty boxes like you!"

"Do you realize how arrogant you come across? Nobody gets the chance to be nice to you or include you in student life! You're missing all the fun! And when you do go outside, you walk around with that big curly head and your chin in the air, ignoring everyone! Stubborn bitch!"

Startled by himself, Edward feared she'd throw him out violently. He quickly blurted out,
"Uh... that programming stuff... it all seems so complicated..."

It was as if Edward had just found Lisette's pause button and pressed it.

"...It is," she said after a painfully long silence. Clearly shaken.
"But you have to learn and understand it step by step. Instead of partying like you do, I spend my time practicing, writing, researching, and testing all kinds of programs and applications. This is my passion! One day, I'll help rule the world!"

Yeah, right, Edward thought - but he looked suddenly interested.

"You're just mocking me," she said immediately.

"No! Not at all!"

"Have you ever heard of the new Intel Pentium 133 megahertz? With a sixteen-megabyte RAM expansion and a quad-speed CD-ROM drive, you can run multiple processes simultaneously without noticeable latency. Add a Sound Blaster 16 with wavetable synthesis and you get a full multimedia configuration compatible with the latest APIs. And via TCP/IP protocols combined with Netscape Navigator, you gain real access to global information networks - straight from universities, research centers, and government institutions. In short: a distributed digital highway that will transform the entire world."

Edward stared at her, mouth open, completely stunned. He briefly considered grabbing a notebook. Seeing his confusion, she shifted tone and translated it into human language.

"Everything you take for granted now, kid - I'll soon control with my software." She pointed at the tangle of monitors, cables, and keyboards on her desk.
"Those computers don't do anything by themselves. Everything depends on how I program them. And believe me, I'm learning the language the future will be written in. Once I graduate, I'll be able to go anywhere in the world and do whatever I want! The world will run on software - and I'll be the one making it!"

Edward tried to say something, but nothing came out. He realized he was decades behind - and didn't want to show it.

"So you're going to, uh..." was all he managed.

"Who knows - maybe then I'll feel like dealing with people like you. Maybe I'll hire you to clean my office," she laughed, so warm and confident that Edward felt the ice completely break.

"No - partying can wait!" she continued. *"If I succeed, I'll just buy everything my mother and I ever dreamed of!"*
She pointed at the photos on the wall.
"My mother worked herself crooked in the bakery we lived above just to pay for everything! Imagine me going out partying instead of giving everything I've got? No. I'm right on schedule. With only a few months left, I already have offers from all over the world. As far as I'm concerned, you can all climb the highest tree and fall right back down!"

Edward could no longer hide his smile, his amazement, or even his admiration. He sensed she might actually be right about her future. And he felt, above all, that she was nowhere near as crazy as she looked.

Another silence fell.

"So... that's it then? Or what did you expect? Ten minutes already gone? Want me to jerk you off for your five thousand francs?" she mocked.

"NO!" Edward replied quickly. *"Absolutely not! I'm impressed! I wish you all the success in the world! I'm glad I got to know you a bit better - really!"*

She laughed. *"So how are you going to prove that, uh..."*

"See?" Edward said. *"Talking to people - you should do this more often. You're actually pretty cool..."*

"Fuck off!" she laughed, clearly charmed, as she turned back to her screen. *"Get the hell out of here!"*

"Next time?" Edward said. *"Let's not tell anyone what actually happened here - or that I paid you."*

"You can tell whatever you want," she said boldly. *"I honestly don't give a shit."*

"By the way, my name is Ed - "

"I know who you are and what you do! And I don't care!" she cut him off, tough as ever. But Edward could clearly see she'd secretly enjoyed their brief exchange.

"Good night, Lisette," he said quietly as he gently closed her door.

Smiling, yet with a strange, indefinable feeling, he walked back to his own room.

Many years later...

Edward had been roaming the world for quite some time, free to do his thing. His thing? Testing, tasting, discovering - and then giving his opinion on it all for *Noblesseul* (the monthly magazine that costs fifty-five dollar and is published in five languages across more than sixty countries). Naturally, all of it delivered in his trademark sarcastic and pretentious style.

The moment he stepped into your establishment, you'd better make sure everything was flawless - down to the grout between the tiles. If not, you essentially had only two options, and everyone knew them: either you discreetly slid him a hefty sum of hush money, or you were mercilessly ridiculed in *Noblesseul* to such an extent that even your houseplants began to feel embarrassed for you.

Noblesseul had become a world-famous, highly popular glossy magazine devoted entirely to things only the super-rich could afford. It featured articles on the most exclusive cars, outrageously expensive wines, jewelry, champagne, watches, stock market launches, charity galas - and reviews of the most expensive restaurants, hotels, clubs, and vacation resorts on the planet.

In the beginning, Edward had been as upright and incorruptible as a newborn baby in a christening gown. Bribery? He wanted nothing to do with it. But life with a beautiful wife and a daughter in college - whom he absolutely did not want to

disappoint - turned out to be damn expensive. Like so many others, they had grown accustomed to luxury as a basic necessity. On top of that, he wanted to remain part of his old circle of friends, who preferred champagne over water and enjoyed distinguishing themselves from the common crowd.

It soon became clear that a little extra on the side was no unnecessary luxury.

Edward's real name was actually Eddy Borkelmans, but to Alain-Philippe d'Otryve Saksen Villard it sounded far too much like a Russian circus bear from the 1950s, roller-skating while playing an accordion. So it became something a bit more refined-sounding: "Edward Borghman."

When he tried out that name at home for the first time, his wife Chris burst into laughter for several minutes.
"Edward Borghman? Seriously?"

Still, it sounded classier, safer, and better suited to the circles he now had to move in. Because let's be honest: who takes "Eddy Borkelmans" seriously in a world of exclusive Michelin-star restaurants, outrageously expensive cars, and chic hotels with gold elevator buttons - where a single night's stay cost more than a small car?

Chris and Edward...

When Edward first introduced Christine to his parents back then, they were immediately won over by her natural beauty, her flair, and her intelligence. “Chris” to friends and acquaintances, of course - because that sounded trendier and younger than Christine.

She had once been a promising medical student. But at twenty-one, she unexpectedly became pregnant by Edward and was therefore forced to shelve all her dreams and plans.

Their world was turned upside down. To make matters worse, their parents got into a bitter, ugly fight with one another. Who was actually to blame? Weren’t there two of them involved? And then the big question: keep “IT” or not?
“She should have kept her legs closed!” versus, on the other side, *“For once he should have used his little brain instead of his dick.”*

Edward, as an only son, fortunately came from a warm and relatively well-off family, so before long everything could be covered with a blanket of love. To the outside world, things soon appeared neatly planned. Her parents even rewrote the story a little: *“Chris was actually too good to become a doctor!”*

Years earlier, Edward had worn out his pants at countless elite schools and universities. He had talked his way into bed with a fair number of young, attractive female students and experienced just about every decadent party imaginable.
But after years of partying and hopping between different fields

of study - journalism, business administration, even psychology - Edward eventually ran aground without a single degree. Out of sheer necessity, he started working as a freelance journalist for a local newspaper, one in which his father happened to be a major shareholder.

To his parents' great relief, Edward had, at some point, met Chris. She seemed capable of taming him.

Edward's father, Theodoor Borkelmans, had worked his way up from a simple, hardworking printer to one of the country's biggest publishers. Newspapers, glossy magazines, and later even shares in a commercial TV station.

It seemed written in the stars that Edward would follow in his father's footsteps. In fact, Chris could have comfortably enjoyed the rest of her life as a housewife and mother to their children - living in a beautiful country house with a weekly cleaning crew, a permanent gardener, tea afternoons with friends, a weekly manicure, and a personal coach.

But not everything went according to plan.

A few bad investments by Father Theodoor, combined with a multimillion-dollar libel lawsuit filed by a well-known plastic surgeon after a "misinterpreted article" in one of his magazines (replacement breast implants were absolutely *not* recycled and reused!), spelled disaster. On top of that came fierce competition from other media companies and the rise of the internet. Theodoor was forced to sing a much humbler tune. He

narrowly escaped bankruptcy, but Edward and Chris were inevitably dragged down into the downturn.

At twenty-six, Edward was a father, without a degree, unemployed, and - after several turbulent years - reduced to a life without staff, without luxury, and without pride.

But Chris and Edward were young. They lived in a pleasant neighborhood, in a modest, "ordinary" house, and floated on a pink cloud with their adorable little daughter, Elisabeth. With far less than before, they discovered they were genuinely happy.

The future seemed bright. Edward was so talented! Surely he would work his way up and find something he truly excelled at.

One of Edward's few real talents turned out to be writing sarcastic and humorous critiques. After several years of thoroughly tearing apart, trashing, and ridiculing new or less fashionable restaurants, he proved himself ready for bigger things. His weekly column in the Friday edition of the newspaper was a hit time and again. To everyone's surprise, the paper even had to be printed in a slightly larger circulation on Fridays!

At a wedding reception of an acquaintance, Edward ran into Alain-Philippe - "Alf" - again. A close friend, a drinking buddy, a fellow student, and... the big boss of *Noblesseul*. Edward had gone on countless heavy benders with him. Together, they had competed in the One-Night Stand Olympics hundreds of times and shared each other's secrets for eternity.

A few weeks after reuniting with Alain-Philippe, Edward was hired at the editorial office with great fanfare - complete with a welcome reception featuring multiple bottles of the most expensive champagne and caviar. From then on, he was free to scour the entire world doing “his thing.”

September 2007

In September 2007, Edward was once again patiently waiting inside an Airbus, ready to take off for the States. A window seat – pure coincidence. He had become so accustomed to traveling and flying that he could usually drift off into dreamland for most of the flight. Over time, he had developed a kind of personal tactic that allowed him to fall asleep easily, anytime and anywhere. As a result, jet lag barely bothered him anymore.

Every now and then, he would be gently awakened by a fellow passenger subtly pointing out his rumbling and snoring.
"*Do you hear that?*" someone once whispered, causing those seated around him to panic, thinking something was seriously wrong with one of the engines. Edward usually just snoozed right on, completely unaware of his own contribution to the onboard atmosphere.

This time, however, things went a little differently than planned.

A mother got into a heated discussion with her sweet young son (estimated age: five).
"*You promised I could sit by the window,*" the boy whined, as the mother tried to calm him down while apologizing to everyone around her.
"*My apologies, I promised him a window seat, but...*"

Just before the situation threatened to spiral out of control, Edward offered to switch seats.

"That's very kind, sir, but then I won't be able to sit next to him!" the woman replied. *"It's always something with him, you know. Last week he shoved one of those tiny Lego pieces - you know, the little round head of a figurine - into his left ear! Sir, I swear I spent almost an entire day waiting in the ER before a doctor could finally get it out!"*

A beautiful flight attendant had been following the whole exchange and stepped in with a solution. Edward and the man sitting next to him were invited to follow her to first class, where they could sit in peace and considerably more luxury. *"We'll just update the passenger list,"* she said kindly.

Edward still heard the little boy screaming, *"I want to fly first class too!"* and thought to himself, *If I'd stayed there any longer, I might have given that kid a flying lesson - straight to his face...*

"Well, well, well... who on earth do we have here, Mister Ed?" someone beside him suddenly said.

Edward looked over and saw an attractive Black woman, impeccably dressed in a dark green tailored suit, adorned with just the right amount of bling.

"You're not going to tell me you don't recognize me anymore, are you?" she laughed.
"Like most people, by the way! It's me - Lisette! ...Lisette from university! You guys used to call me 'the colossus'! Still nothing?"

Edward couldn't believe his eyes. Lisette weighed less than half of what she once had and looked like someone who had completely made it in life. She was elegantly dressed and even looked a bit stern now, wearing large fashionable glasses with tiny diamonds on the sides. Her big Afro hairstyle had been replaced by stylish, pinned-up, chunky dreadlocks.

"How?" Edward laughed. *"You look so... good! It seems like all your dreams from back then came true!"*

"Thank you," she said proudly. *"Almost all of them came true... Where there's a will, there's a way. But one of the most important dreams is no longer possible. Shortly after I graduated, my mother passed away. She got sick and died within three days. She never got to see me become successful in what I do."*

"That's terrible to hear," Edward said softly. *"She must be somewhere watching, incredibly proud of how well you're doing - because at first glance, you seem –"*

"I can't complain," Lisette sighed. *"My husband and I started our own company together and later sold it for a very nice sum. But long before that, right after my mother died, I was left completely alone. The old owners of the bakery where we lived upstairs were childless and didn't get to enjoy their retirement for long. I took care of them in their final years as if they were my own parents. They were exhausted - worked themselves to the bone. I cried a lot for them... And when they passed away, to my great surprise, I inherited everything."*

She stared straight ahead for a moment.

"Thanks to that money, I was able to immediately buy the crème de la crème of advanced hardware. And you know what's funny? When I stopped eating cake and pastries from their bakery every day, I started losing weight naturally. Healthier food, more exercise... It was also one of my mother's last wishes, on her deathbed. And coincidentally, around that time I had just developed a program that calculates and tracks how much 'too much' really is for you!"

She smiled broadly, showing her perfectly white teeth.

"I've thought about you sometimes," Edward said.

"Oh, me too," Lisette grinned. *"That night, I was actually hoping we'd have sex!"*

"NO!" Edward shouted. *"You hid that incredibly well! You were rude, and I was... honestly a bit scared of you!"*

"I was young and hopeless - past twenty and still a virgin!"
She burst out laughing loudly. Edward - and even the surrounding passengers - joined in with amused smiles.

"You wouldn't even let me sit on your bed!" Edward laughed.

"I know!" she said even louder. *"I'd never been that nervous in my life. I wondered for years how I could lower myself enough to ask for that money - and even accept it!"*

"Well... I'm still ashamed of it," Edward admitted quietly.