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Andorra

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ANDORRA

I love the Andorra question in Trivial Pursuit. It's a sneaky one. It isn't merely *What is the absurdly insignificant country wedged between France and Spain?* Or *What minor principality is located in the Pyrenees?* No, the question asks for *countries beginning and ending with the letter A*. And it asks for *six of them*. Australia, Austria, Argentina...and then, usually, there is silent pondering from my fellow players while I bide my time. Angola, sometimes, and Algeria. Arabia mentioned once, as a hopeful half-joke. I am the only one who ever knows, which is a rush. One time, it was down to the wire; all three of us—well, two teams of two, Tami and Dennis, Eileen and Phil, and me, I am always my own solo team—were crammed together in the center space, all three plastic pies wedged with plastic triangles, each of us just needing to answer one final, trivial question to win. Earlier in the evening, I'd won my blue Geography wedge with a correct answer to *What country is the world's leading producer of cork?* A relief, because Geography is my worst category, always the one I want to get out of the way. And there, at the end of the game, dozens of Geography questions had come and gone, but not my beloved Andorra one. So, I gambled, chose Geography...and there it was, like an omen, a confirmation of faith. I rattled off Australia, Austria, Angola, Algeria, Argentina, paused for effect, then Oh, of course, *Andorra*. Not one of my dear, college-educated friends had even heard of it. Andorra, I told them. It's right on the border between France and Spain, about half the size of Manhattan. A dive of a country, you only stop there for cheap liquor and cigarettes, it's the Tijuana of Europe.

I'm glad you learned *something* useful in France, Eileen said, laughing, and her husband Phil gave her a diplomatic shove. But I laughed right along: Yeah, the cultural and social implications of duty-free shopping.

You ever hear from that English girl you met there? someone asked. Judith? How is she doing?

She's fine, I tell them. Just had her third kid.

And the mustache guy?

Earl. Yeah, *they're* who dragged me to Andorra, I said, What a sad little weekend that was. I asked if everyone wanted to play another round, but there were the usual mentions of babysitters to be relieved, early morning carpools to soccer games. Tami helped me carry dirty glasses in to the kitchen while Dennis got their coats; after the four of them left I accidentally knocked the board over and had to crawl around on my hands and knees, finding and picking up by myself all the colorful little plastic wedges.

Judith is a hearty, blooming girl with exquisite English rose skin and French far more fluent than mine; it rolls off her tongue with no regard for accent or correct verb conjugation, but it rolls. I am unwilling to commit to speaking the language—and make a mistake—and so I have merely perfected three or four sentences I can toss off with a thoughtlessly bilingual air and lilting accent, which gives the French people here in Toulouse the impression that I am a young American woman working hard to learn. In the event I am shammed into silence, Judith is usually around, or Earl, to pick up the conversation, to cover for me or explain about train schedules or groceries or crucial idiosyncrasies in French law.

Judith is in a special program at the Universite here, earning a certificate to teach middle school French; as soon as she returns to Sussex she will marry Graham, her boyfriend of five years, and they will set up housekeeping. The extra certificate will bring in more money, and help pay off her medical bills. She shows me the tattoos: two azure dots, about three inches above each nipple, another blue dot just above her navel, another at the base of her throat. Connect the dots and they form a cross. On an X-ray they form a grid, by which to line up her nodes and keloid scars. She was diagnosed with Hodgkins at seventeen; she attacked the disease right back, with the same unabashed effort with which she speaks French. Her spleen was removed, they radiated and poisoned her to the point of constant nausea and sudden but temporary alopecia. After five years, if her lymphatic fluid runs clean and clear, the doctors will deem her safe to get pregnant and have hearty, blooming children of her own. She has one year to go. Meanwhile, she is the picture of health. She skies, she jogs, she races full-breathed up the four flights of her crumbling brick apartment house overlooking the river (my apartment, on the second floor of a brand-new stucco building next to a bus stop, has

an elevator and a paid-for phone, compliments of my own scholarship sponsor), she shows up at my place once or twice a week with two bottles of wine and an appetite for pasta and pate. We invariably finish the wine, including the bottle I'd opened to cook with, and dig into my ready bottles of Courvoisier or absinthe. Judith invariably gushes, then, about Graham; he has stood by her the whole time, is waiting for her back home, patiently, and she misses him desperately. She describes their sex to me, without a single profane or vulgar word, yet it always sounds wildly athletic, sweaty, a Dafoe-ish, earthy romp.

Judith shames me. She is focused and driven, holding up her end of bargains, honoring the sacrifices that sent her here. She doesn't understand why I seem paralyzed by nothing; she gets after me to hike, to go to class, to do *something*. Earl, our other non-French friend here in Toulouse, agrees with Judith. Early in November he plans a trip for the three of us: just an overnight, the skiing's great. An hour or so by bus.

"Andorra?" asks Judith. "What the hell is that?"

"It's a little country down the road from here," I tell them. "It's a total pit stop."

"You've been?"

"No, I've just heard."

"From whom? Who do you talk to besides us?"

"It's cheap," says Earl. "And it's close, and I have a coupon."

"Maybe," I say. "It could be fun. A nice break."

"A break from *what*?" Judith asks me. "You sit around on your ass all day."

"Exactly," Earl says. He waves a travel brochure at us, with French, Spanish, and English columns of Andorran information. "We'll air her out. We'll take her skiing." He is pear-shaped and neckless and mustached, and so his concerned disapproval feels warm and paternal. For three years he taught high school French—his is strong on accurate tenses, with formal, textbook phrasing—before the Tallahassee school board realized he lacked certification; he is here for ten months to obtain the official paperwork. His wife Cassandra, working at a Walmart back home and studying at night to sell Florida real estate, sends care packages of American munchies he shares with Judith and me. He shows us pictures of Cassandra; she is a second-generation Columbian, pretty,

with outdated hair and gold cross earrings. They have been married for only six months. She is saving money for two things; she wants to come visit him in France, and she wants to have her breasts done. In one photo she is wearing a snug red sweater; she already looks to be a healthy 36B. *I think they're pretty great as is*, Earl has told us, gazing at her picture. But if she wants to, you know, do it for *her*, well, I want her to be happy. That's what it's about. Don't tell her I told you.

"She's not taking advantage of her time here," Earl says to Judith. "She should at least be traveling."

"She should at least be doing *anything*. A passionate love affair with a Jacques or Pierre. It's what I'd do if it weren't for Graham."

"You know, Cassie's brother Rick lives in Los Angeles," he says to me. "He's a terrific guy, you ought to look him up when you go back."

"You *should*," says Judith. "That'd be fantastic! The four of you could be in-laws!"

"Why don't we just plan on Andorra for now?" I say.

"It's all skiing, you know. There's nothing else to do," Judith tells me, looking at the brochure. "She doesn't ski," she says to Earl.

"Skiing's dangerous," I say. "You're just swooshing along like that. You can't stop, you've got no control—"

"So, fine, she'll shop. It's duty-free," he informs us. He takes the brochure from Judith, and reads: "*Duty-free shopping is the mainstay of the Andorran economy.*"

"Well, that is nice. I like a country that's 'duty-free,'" I say.

"Independent. Doesn't owe anybody anything. No responsibility."

"What do they speak there?" asks Judith, ignoring me.

"*The national language is Catalan, a romance language related to the Provençal groups. French and Spanish are also spoken,*" Earl reads. "I think Cassie might speak a little Catalan. I'm making reservations."

"Wait, I need to check my schedule," I say. "This weekend might not be good."

Judith prods me. "Come on. You can't possibly have something else on."

"I make plans, sometimes."

"You do not."

Judith is almost right. I almost never plan; it's too complicated. After a few weeks in Toulouse I'd even stopped going to class; it didn't matter, my scholarship is more diplomatic than academic, my sponsors

merely wanted three written reports during the year, assuring I'd broken no French laws, that I am projecting a friendly American spirit. I sleep late, wander the crumbling brick part of town, sit in cafes for coffees and glasses of kir, do a little grocery shopping, some laundry to rinse the Gauloise smoke from already-clean clothes. The only educational thing I do is read: I buy French translations of novels I've already read, to convince myself I'm learning something or making actual use of my time: *L'Obscurite de Jude*, *Autant en Emport le Vent*, *Le Bell Jar*. *Le Choix de Sophie* is a wonderful source of dirty French. Evenings I am usually alone, hoping for the phone to ring or for Judith or Earl to come by, to disapprove and shame me, to drag me out to the creperie, or for a walk, or just to use my free phone. I watch them dialing eagerly; I listen to them coo.

"Well, like you said. I don't ski. You want me to travel to another country just to buy booze and key chains?"

"It's hardly a country." Earl laughs. "It's trying to be a country. It's a struggling little principality that needs our tourist francs to survive."

"So you'll sit in the bloody lodge," Judith says. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"I *could* have other plans this weekend," I venture. "Maybe I'm seeing Jacques and Pierre."

She snorts. "Oh, really?"

"You never know. Maybe I've got some other commitment."

"Like hell. You're duty-free."

Earl reserves two rooms, one for him, one for Judith and me, in Soldeu, just across the border, at the one of two lodges in town. We can split the cost of the two rooms, he tells us. And there's even a prix-fixe menu at the restaurant. Good, cheap fondue.

"*Less than 2% of Andorran land is arable; most of Andorra's food is imported,*" I read to them scornfully from the brochure. "They don't even have their own food?"

Cassandra gets her Christmas bonus early from Walmart, and tells Earl that she's found a last-minute discount fare, that she's coming to France to visit him. This weekend. When Earl tries to cancel his room at the lodge he is informed there is no refund policy.

"*The Andorran tourist trade plays a significant role in the nation's economy,*" I tell them. "You were right, they need us."

“We’ll go anyway,” Earl says.

“You haven’t seen each other in four months. You really want to spend two precious days in Andorra with *us*? Just forfeit the money,” I say.

“No,” he says. “I’ll surprise her. It’ll be like another honeymoon. Or any honeymoon. We couldn’t afford one, last spring. Spent it all on the wedding.”

“That’s sweet,” says Judith.

“I miss her so much.” His mustache quivers. “My Cassie from Tallahassee.”

“He’s right, it doesn’t matter where you are, when you’re in love.” Judith says. “Graham used to bring me roses when I was in hospital, sneak a bottle of Remy in. It was so romantic. Better than our walking trip in Ireland.”

I am suspicious of Judith’s sudden insipidness; she looks misty-eyed and pensive and I am not at all surprised, the following day, when Judith shows up at my door to use my phone. Now Graham, too, is coming to join us for our trip to Andorra. The lodge is quite happy to add another room to the reservation. One for Earl and Cassandra, one for Judith and Graham, and one for me, for which I will now have to pay the full rate. Fondue for five.

“*Native Andorrans are a minority in their own country; Spanish, French, and Portuguese residents make up 70% of the population,*” I read to the table at large.

“Huh,” says Earl.

“Really?” says Graham.

“That’s interesting,” says Cassandra.

“Put that bloody brochure away,” says Judith.

The rectangular tables at the lodge fondue restaurant are designed to seat even numbers of people; Judith and Graham sit facing Earl and Cassandra, while I sit at the head, like a Chairman of the Board of a struggling company.

“And Andorra doesn’t even have its own head of state,” I inform them. “The President of France and the Spanish Bishop of Seo de Urgel co-run the country.”

“Really?” says Graham again, politely. He has long pale hair in a ponytail, and Judith’s porcelain skin. Their children will glow like milk.

“The Andorran army hasn’t fought in over 700 years,” I say. “*Its main duty is to present the Andorran flag at official ceremonies.*” I pause to drink from my mug of hot cider.

“Its main *duty*?” Judith says to me. “So much for your utopia.”

“That’s not much of a duty. Waving a flag. Even I could handle that.”

“Did I tell you guys Cassandra’s ancestors are Catalan? Catalonian. Cat...a lone?” says Earl, uncertain.

“Catalan,” she says, struggling to remove her new red parka, which is snug.

“Here, hon,” Earl says, helping her.

“Thanks,” she says. She gives him a quick kiss, then folds her arms over her chest, self-conscious. She has surprised Earl with her brand-new breasts; they are now emphatically C+. He had surprised her with a new parka, having sold his textbooks for the extra cash (No problem, I can share with Judith), not knowing about her increase in cup size. The parka is therefore too small and they both feel guilty and terrible, like half an O. Henry story.

This is our first meal all together. We arrived in Andorra at ten this morning, jolting across the border from France—no passports necessary, just a bored border guard waving us in—on icy roads littered with cigarette butts. The Andorran air smells of stale smoke and candy bars and gummy, peeling labels on chilled glass. The lodge is a 12-room motel boasting fire alarm instructions, a local interest pamphlet, and a faux-Swiss menu all in linguistic triplicate (French, Spanish, and English—nothing in Catalan). On arriving, there were hurried and vague comments about everyone meeting out front “after we get settled,” then both couples vanished. My room is a rectangular space with a narrow, ten-foot-high window at one end, just framing the edge of the motel sign. I set my bag down on one of the two queen-sized beds and contemplated the bidet, wishing I’d brought along some delicate underthings to wash. All afternoon I sat in the lodge drinking brandy and reading (*Sarah et Le Lieutenant Francais*), watching the bright red dot of Cassandra, followed by neutral dots of Earl, Judith, and Graham, ascend and descend a Pyreneesian slope.

Strands of gluey cheese, draping from communal fondue pot to mouth, crisscross the table like wilting streamers. We are all drinking the *de rigueur* hot cider, which Judith has warned me, is *not* the same as the Martinelli sparkling apple juice I drank as a kid.

“The U.S. and Andorra didn’t establish diplomatic relations until 1995. ‘*The United States consulate officials now visit Andorra regularly*,’” I read to them.

“In order to suck up the duty-free,” says Judith. Graham chuckles, nods.

“You know, this sounds stupid, but what exactly does that mean? ‘Duty-free?’” Cassandra asks.

“No sales tax,” says Graham.

“For non-residents,” adds Earl. “The assumption is, you’re just visiting, you’re making your purchases, you’re leaving. You aren’t consuming the goods in the country, so you don’t have a *duty* to pay a tax.” He pours another round of cider.

“My only duty is to load up,” I say.

“There’s a limit, though. I mean, you can’t buy yourself a thousand gallons of absinthe,” says Earl.

“This place makes me sort of sad,” says Cassandra. “Like it’s lonely. It has no real identity. People just passing through, buying stuff cheap then hurrying to leave. It’s like no one wants to make a home here.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, it’s a plucky little country,” I say, swallowing cider. “*Determined to maintain its independence, Andorra nevertheless struggles to define itself as a full member of the European Community*—”

“Give me that,” says Earl, mock-exasperated.

I wave the brochure out of his reach; he gropes for it with big brother zeal, reaching over Cassandra.

“Honey,” she says, her fondue fork bobbing.

“Oh, sorry,” he says, glancing at her.

Chastened, I hand over the travel brochure. “Earl just wanted to educate me a little,” I tell Cassandra. “I’m terrible about Geography.”

Cassandra smiles briefly.

“Good skiing today, wasn’t it?” says Graham.

“Have you ever skied in America?” asks Cassandra. “Colorado’s great. Utah. We love to travel.”

“We do too, it’s just so damn expensive. It’ll be a few years, yet, before we get there,” says Judith.

“Kids, first,” says Graham.

Judith kisses his cheek. “Can’t wait. The *second* I get the all clear...” she gives him a loving shove.

“Us, too,” says Cassandra, agreeing. “As soon as Earl gets home we’ll get started.” She bumps his shoulder affectionately. “Lots of kids.”

“We want three,” says Earl.

“We’ll *start* with three, see how it goes,” says Judith.

“Thank God you guys’re gonna reproduce like that,” I say. “Lets me off the hook.”

“Big families are nice,” says Cassandra. “We might even adopt some. Or take in foster kids.”

“Well, say goodbye to those dreams of travel, then,” I comment.

“What’s the matter with you?” Judith asks me, quietly.

“We need more cider,” I announce. “Or is there a limit on that?”

“*Encore une carafe?*” Earl asks a passing waiter.

“I’d love us to buy a place in Colorado, someday,” says Cassandra. “A little town, though. Not the cities. Room for kids to run around safe.”

“Good place for a family,” says Earl. “A *big* family,” he says, pointedly, to me.

“We like living where everyone knows everyone,” Graham says.

“When Judith was ill—”

“Everyone in the village helped out,” says Judith. “They donated blood, cooked us meals. Like one big family.”

“That’s beautiful,” says Earl. “That sense of community.”

A harried waiter plunks a finger-smudged pitcher of cider on the table, cautions it’s *tres tres chaud*. No one reaches for it, so I go ahead and wrap my hand in a napkin, then fill my mug. I swallow, careful to mask how it’s burning my lips, my tongue, my throat.

“Do you think teachers have more kids than other people?”

Cassandra asks. “I mean, don’t teachers generally love kids? Earl does.”

“So does Judith,” says Graham. “She’ll make a great mother.”

“France and Spain pay for all the teachers here,” I say. “Half of Andorran kids go to French schools, the other half go to Spanish schools. They don’t even have their own schools.”

“Really?” says Graham politely, wiping his mouth.

“And there’s no colleges.”

“Oh.”

“It *is* sort of like there’s no identity to this place,” I say. “It only exists through its connection to other countries, what they can get out of it. It’s totally dependent on outsiders. It *is* pretty sad.” No one says anything.

“Don’t you think?”

No one speaks, then:

“I thought you admired its independence,” says Judith. “It’s duty-free-ness.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a limit, like Earl said. How much duty-free can one country take? Waving its little flag around. Desperate for tourists to come visit. At some point it’s just pathetic.” I am suddenly confused. “Or, no, like Cassandra said. It’s like a person selling herself cheap. Just for some attention. Right? Isn’t that what someone said?”

Still no one speaks. They all drink more cider.

Later, before the chocolate fondue is served, Cassandra, Judith and I excuse ourselves for the women’s bathroom. The cider has gone sour in my mouth; it feels as if cheese grease is seeping through my pores. I splash water on my face, notice Cassandra glancing at herself in the mirror, a sideways angle, a full front.

“You look great,” I tell her.

“Oh, thanks.” She adjusts an earring; the little gold cross dangles.

“How do you feel?” I wipe my face dry with paper towels.

“Oh, fine. That was a heavy meal, but today was a good work-out, so...”

“Hell of a good work-out,” says Judith from a toilet stall, with a hearty chuckle. “Hope Graham saved something up for tonight.”

“So, are you sore?” I ask.

Cassandra looks at me, puzzled. “Uh, not really...”

I hear Judith cough from her stall.

“And there won’t be any problem with breast feeding, right? For all those kids. A friend of mine had it done, and she was worried, but the doctor told her it’d be no problem.”

A flush from Judith’s stall, then quiet. Cassandra looks at me with her mouth open, something betrayed and churning inside her, and I suddenly realize, too late, to shut up. I turn the water back on, resquirt soap, wash my hands hurriedly, loudly.

“He, uh, just mentioned it,” I say. “Just in passing.”

“Uh huh.”

“Just that...if it was something you wanted to do...he thought you looked great before. He loved your breasts just like they were.” I am making this much, much worse. I feel a wave of bloating from the pounds of cheese, the brandy and cider, all duty-free and sickening.

Cassandra turns away from me, jaw set.

Behind us, Judith emerges from the stall, approaches the sink without meeting my eyes. “When I was ill,” she says intimately to Cassandra, “I

was worried about that, too. Breastfeeding, you know, but it was a different thing.”

“Yeah, Earl told me.”

“All that poison they were pumping into me. Would it be all right to nurse a baby, later. I was really concerned.”

“Mm,” says Cassandra, empathetically. “So, what did they say?”

I leave the bathroom, leave them to their sororal discussion. I think, with a little relief, that now I will never have to meet Cassandra’s brother Rick in Los Angeles.

That night, when I get into one of the two queen-size beds and snap off the light, I am jolted by the sudden reddish illumination of a ten-foot-high cross at the end of the room, glowing at me. In my cider-thickened head I realize, and panic, that I have inexplicably been chosen as a Joan or Bernadette, the Maid of Andorra, that I am being called. The cross glows, then goes dark, glows, then goes dark, like a repeated warning, a visual boom. I am straining for the voice of God, or Saint Catherine or Margaret, or someone, to tell me what I am supposed to do, to call me to my duty, to save my people, my family of fellow men, when the cross sputters—an electric flicker—and I realize it’s only the projection of the tall window’s wooden cross-frame across the room; the orange neon motel sign beams on and off, just outside, and will continue to flash the tawdry cross at me until the clammy Andorran dawn.

The next morning, hungover and crampish, we split up for shopping, crunching off across the snow in different directions—Judith and Graham, Earl and Cassie, and me—to different garish stores. We meet up for the bus at eleven, all carrying identical bags with identical bottles of brandies, Cointreaux, and absinthe, all of us at our limit. We board the bus in the same order as before—Earl and Cassandra, Judith and Graham, and me.

“Well, yeah, nice place to *visit*, but...” Earl says as the bus starts up. Graham chuckles along with him. Judith twists Graham’s hair into a ponytail. Cassandra looks out the window. It has started to snow, lightly; Earl wonders aloud if it will be snowing as well in Toulouse.

“What are those for?” Judith asks me, noticing the cartons of cigarettes in my bag. “You don’t smoke.”

I shrug. “They were cheap,” I say.

Because I have the empty seat, all to myself, everyone loads their breakable, clinking bags next to me; I have to hold on to them when the bus lurches across splits and slicks on the road home, to keep everyone's duty-free purchases from falling and breaking.

I try not to pick up the phone. I can't help it. I dial a number, lets it ring once, hang up, wait a moment. Then I dial again—it picks up on the first ring.

“Allo?”

“It's me,” I say. “Can you talk?”

“Yes. Marie-Ange is still at her parents, with the children.”

“I'm sorry to call...”

“O.K., it is all right.”

“I just got back.”

“And it was as I told you?”

“Oh, yeah. You were right. A pit stop. A sad, sad place to be.” I pause.

“Did you miss me?”

“Of course,” he says.

“Really?”

“Did you bring me something back?”

“Mm. I have something for you,” I say.

Claude laughs. “And when do I get this?”

“Can you come over tonight?”

“I...don't know.”

“Well?”

“It is snowing.”

“Oh, come on.”

“I should be here when they get back, *mon chou*.”

“Just for an hour.” I humbly wait for the silent process of pros and cons, the weighing of factors. “Did you know that, in Andorra, non-citizens are allowed to own only thirty-three percent of the shares of a company? I learned that.”

“*C'est vrai?*”

“And I had a religious epiphany. Almost. I thought I had a sign. I was going to atone for all my sins, and commit myself to God. But I just had too much cider.” I stop talking and wait, listening to the silence.

“*Une demi-heure.*”

“*Bon*. I’ll leave the door open downstairs.”
 He hangs up without saying good-bye.

On the train home from a September weekend alone in Paris, he had eyed me appraisingly, smiled, indicated with his head that I should take the empty seat across from him, facing him. I was linguistically drained from a weekend of ritually spinning my three or four perfect French sentences to strangers and shopkeepers; I asked him, leaning across the aisle, if he spoke English. He smiled again, nodded indulgently, and so I moved to the seat facing him. I rode the last two hours back to Toulouse backward, a sensation which always unnerves me, a retrogressive advancement. He had the strangest teeth I’d ever seen; the front upper left tooth was almost twice as wide as the right one, with a tiny gap in between.

At the Toulouse station he, Claude, offered me a lift home; we stopped first, of course, at a little bar he knew, for absinthe. Later I was taken aback by his Gallic, uncircumcised penis, poking through his boxer shorts with its rawish red tip like a dog’s penis, or a Sharpie permanent marker. He used my phone to call his wife, ostensibly from the station at Limoges, to tell her he’d left Paris later than expected. Now, after three months, he generally speaks French to me; I almost always respond in English, still unwilling to commit, and make a mistake.

He will hurry into the downstairs front door to the building I have wedged unlocked with an empty pack of Gauloises, and I will be waiting for him in a robe, fresh from a shower to rinse off the gummy smell of Andorran air. He will delight in the duty-free bottle of absinthe I bought for him, which, of course, will be kept for him here on my kitchen shelf, and the packs of cigarettes. We will drink much of the bottle, as much as we can in fifteen or twenty minutes, while chatting, trivially, in different languages, then have quick sex in my little narrow bed. I’ll use my perfect, dirty French. He’ll leave time for a brief shower afterward, using the soap I keep here for him, the brand he informed me Marie-Ange keeps in their shower at home. He’ll kiss me good-bye hurriedly, mashing my lip against his wide upper left tooth; through the window I’ll watch him exit the front door below, dutifully hurrying home, accidentally kicking the unwedged pack of cigarettes with him out onto the sidewalk, into the gutter, into the drifting, dirty snow.