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Reconciling Beauty and Connection

I

The two-lane highway into town is now paved and well-traveled. Gone are the days of dirt roads consisting of sand, gravel, and glacial silt. Replaced with asphalt and painted lines. The 368-mile highway stretches from Fairbanks in Interior Alaska, travels south, ending in Valdez, located in a fjord in Prince William Sound. 368 miles of changing landscape. From vast, open tundra dotted with birch and spruce trees to rolling hills and miles-long lakes. The road often following rivers that fill with salmon in July and August swimming upstream to lay eggs in the same place they were born, and winding passed the base of mountains and through mountain passes. Ears popping as you gain elevation. Thompson Pass, a 2,600-foot gap in the Chugach Mountains, leads into Valdez. During the summer and fall, the mountains look like hills as you drive amongst them - between, around, and over them. Squishy tundra covered in berry bushes ripe with blueberries in August and September. During winter and spring, the same mountains are blanketed with sparkling, white snow as Thompson Pass is the snowiest place in Alaska, averaging over 500 inches of snow each year. Light blue glacier ice coming into view at the tops of mountains as you pass Mount Dimond, Girls Mountain, Prospector Peak, and East Peak. There are so many mountains and glaciers it is difficult to know the names of all you see.

After descending Thompson Pass, the highway winds through Keystone Canyon, following the Lowe River. The canyon walls consisting of 600 feet of rock, the sky darkening as you enter the canyon, daylight blocked by its walls. Waterfalls pour down the canyon walls, spraying the highway during the rainy months, flowing into the glacial silty, Lowe River. Snowmelt and heavy rains affect the rapids and water levels of the river. As winter nears, the river begins to quiet, exposing boulders and muddy riverbed. The highway ends in Valdez, located in a fjord in Prince William Sound and the river flows into the sound.

II

I’ve often wondered when the pronunciation of the city’s name changed. How does a small, coastal city in Alaska, named in 1790 after Spanish Naval Officer, Antonio Valdès y Fernàndez Bazàn, go from Valdès to Valdēz? What circumstances arose that warranted the change? Was the city ever known by its Spanish pronunciation? Was a decision made to change the pronunciation? This deviation has perplexed me. Those who say Valdeez are in the minority. I’m reminded of this when I’m speaking to a customer service representative on the phone as they confirm my mailing address.

Them: “Your mailing address is P.O. Box 593, correct?”

Me: “Yes, correct.”

Them: “And, (pause) Valdès, Alaska?”

Me: “It’s pronounced Valdeez.”

Them: “Oh, got it. Valdeez.”

I wonder if the unincorporated community in Southwest Florida that was named after the same Spanish explorer is pronounced Valdeez. Two communities in the farthest-reaching states, Alaska and Florida, named for the same person, but pronounced differently. Why did we discard the Spanish pronunciation? The authentic name erased and replaced with a new, Westernized version. I wonder if others feel as unsettled about this as I.

III

On the two-lane road into town, between West Peak’s base and Port Valdez coastline, the outgoing tide exposing mud. Decades ago, traveling this road was dependent on the tide; high tide, the road vanished, the sea making its presence known to the mountain. Low tide, the road emerged; the sea saying goodbye to the mountain, until tomorrow. Improvements had been made and knowledge gained. Now the road is here to stay; the sea no longer visits the mountain for it is separated by the two-lane road into town. This is the only difference. The tide still comes and goes, mud visible and invisible. I wonder what it was like to live in a town where access was at the mercy of the sea. The ebb and flow of the tide conceding connectedness or isolation.

IV

I moved to Valdez from Fairbanks twenty years ago. I said yes to relocating because I wanted to experience milder winters as I was tired of below zero temperatures. After our son was born in Fairbanks, it was important to me to live in a place where we could get outside and explore, regardless of the season, and Valdez provided the opportunity. The winters were mild but snowy, it’s on the road system (an added benefit when you consider the majority of Alaska is not accessible by road), it’s a small, quaint community, and the beauty is spectacular. Valdez is an ocean city surrounded by the Chugach Mountains.

After years of living here and seeing the same scenery, I’ve become desensitized to its beauty.

These feelings wash away when I interact with someone who is visiting Valdez for the first time, particularly on beautiful sunny days. They open their arms wide, tilt their heads back and lift their eyes to the sky, moving their bodies from side to side as if to say, “This!” Taking in the blue sunny skies, giant mountains, and dark blue ocean, they exclaim:

* “This is amazing!”
* “I *cannot* believe the beauty!”
* “How incredible is this?”
* “Can you believe such a place exists?”
* “You live *here*!”

They are overcome by the natural beauty which surrounds us, excited to be here and moved by the experience. In these moments, I too tilt my head back, lift my eyes to the sky, and take in the blue sunny skies, giant mountains and dark blue ocean. I take a deep breath and with my feet grounded to the earth below, I too, am in awe of the majestic beauty that surrounds me. In that moment, I feel what they feel, as though I’m seeing the beauty of Valdez for the first time. I am grateful.

V

Things I Know to be True About Valdez:

* It was a Gold Rush town in the late 19th century.
* The original town site was devastated by the 1964 Earthquake and the new town was rebuilt on more stable ground 4 miles away.
* It is known for the 1989 Exxon Valdez Oil Spill that occurred in Prince William Sound and was the largest oil spill to occur in US waters until the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010.
* It is the terminus for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline that runs 800 miles from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez.
* It is the northernmost ice-free port in the United States.
* The mountainsides turn green in the springtime with incredible speed. One day they’re brown, the next day you notice the buds on the trees, alders, and bushes, then overnight, Boom! They’re green. These mountains are the reason Valdez has been referred to as the ‘Little Switzerland’.
* It is a great place to raise kids.
* Everyone looks out for each other. When my son was in elementary school, he had an aversion to wearing a winter coat. Before we left the house on our way to school, I would say, “Grab your coat and be sure to wear it at recess.” While leaving the school one day, a friend noticed my son outside at recess, he was wearing a sweatshirt, no winter coat. She made a point to mention it to me. Later the same day, my son walked in the door and after asking him about his day, I said, “You need to wear your coat during recess. I know today you didn’t wear it. It’s important you wear it every day.” He looked at me with wide eyes and replied, “How did you know?” “I always know,” I said. See. Every one looks out for each other.

VI

There are two types of people who live in Valdez. Those who moved here and those whose families have lived here for generations. These established Valdezians have parents and grandparents who grew up here, lived in ‘Old Town’ and survived the ’64 earthquake. They moved their families to the new town location and enrolled their kids in the newly built schools. Kids who went on to graduate from Valdez High School too. They had kids who also graduated from Valdez High School. Their adult children are still here, raising their own kids. Generations living in Valdez. They were here when the Exon Valdez oil tanker spilled 10.8 million gallons of crude oil in Prince William Sound. As Valdezians, they did their part and worked hard to help clean up the coastline. These families are known as ‘Old Town’ families. Their roots run deep in Valdez. They will continue to live here for generations.

This is not me. I’ve raised my kids in Valdez. Two were born in the local hospital that was later bulldozed to make room for the new hospital in 2004. Valdez is the place I live but I am not tied to it. I wonder how my children feel. Are they tied to this place? Do they feel their roots run deep in Valdez? I am thankful for all Valdez has given to me. While I have wonderful memories of Valdez and made long-lasting friendships, I will not stay. It is the place I live, but it is not my home. It is not the home that one feels within their being. It is temporary. On the two-lane road out of town, between West Peak’s base and Port Valdez coastline, the outgoing tide exposing mud, I head north towards home.