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## Upfront: A Way of Life on Barataria Boulevard

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# **UPFRONT: A WAY OF LIFE ON BARATARIA BOULEVARD**

by Shelby Leco





Self-portrait of Shelbey Leco with her mother, Marie Palermo Leco, and father, Vincent Joseph Leco Jr., includes fava beans in honor of her Sicilian heritage and fish for her Filipino and Cajun heritage.

## A Townie

My name is Shelbey Leco. I've lived in southern Louisiana all of my life. I'm what you call a 'townie.' I've never heard this term before until my ex-boyfriend, Dallas, used it one day. I was house-sitting out in the Irish Channel. Dallas came over and we walked down to Magazine Street to Basin to have dinner. Dallas said we should go because of the great food and the nice view. It was a beautiful sunny evening; we sat outside on the front patio facing the busy street across from the Breaux Mart. The metal mesh patio tables were so close to the sidewalk. I could smell the light perfume of all the beautifully dressed people passing us by, and began to feel self-conscious about my outfit.

I was dressed in a loose worn out black t-shirt and a faded yellow jean skirt with little tears in it that reached down to my knees. I also had my dark black combat boots on, scuffed from the soul to the tops of my shoes. I did most of my shopping down at the Thrift City USA off Lapalco Boulevard. Dallas and I

always had great conversations, never dull. Our topic of conversation for that afternoon was about how we were so different from each other. We asked one another what category of people each of us were: I quickly came to the solution, "You're a hippie." He had told me so many stories and each one seemed to occur in different places: Maine, New Mexico, Colorado, Louisiana, Austria, and Spain. Trying to piece together the time line of Dallas' life and align the places they were in was always a struggle for me. He was also always dressed so causally: a worn out white t-shirt with remnants of saw dust, navy blue mesh shorts, and his notorious light brown sandals. The ones he got more shit about than compliments.

The category I chose for myself was "hood" because people could always tell that I was from the West-bank. On the other side of the Mississippi River from the city, it is a part of the New Orleans' mostly residential, suburban neighborhoods. At the time, if I

had to choose one word to describe the Westbank it would be ghetto.

The Westbank is driving down Barataira Boulevard. It is going to the neighborhood Walmart and smelling freshly soiled baby diapers all over the parking lot ground and shattered fragments of beer bottles. You'll see plastic grocery bags stuck in the flowering bushes with purple lipstick cigarette buds caught in the soil. You'll see young mothers loading groceries in the trunks of beat up silver Hondas holding their new born in one arm while loading their groceries with the other, yelling at their baby daddy with their phone pushed up between their shoulders and face. You'll see white suburban moms hastily running out of the store with their shopping carts to their SUVs trying to complete a list of errands that takes all day. You'll see families coming out the store with two shopping carts pouring over with groceries in one hand, liquor and smokes in the other, with seven or eight of their kids running ahead to the car. The groceries they pay with their food stamp cards and the liquor with huge wads of cash.

You'll see tricked out pick-up trucks playing Future's "Low Life" coming through newly installed speakers with the bass so high that the entire ground vibrates and the LED lights shine around illuminating the dimly lit area. You'll see girls sitting in their cars trying to apply heavy eyeliner across their heavily shaded eye make-up in the rearview before they start their server jobs. You'll see young kids smoking weed outside, and instead of people looking at them in a deviant way whoever passes by wants to know where they get their shit. You'll see little old white ladies in the garden trying to keep to themselves, and you find the little old black ladies at the deli counter arguing with employees about why the Chisesi ham isn't on roll back.

The Westbank is passing up the Jefferson Parish Credit Union. You can never drive up to the ATM to deposit your cash because nine times out of ten you'll see a man sitting on a worn-out, white scuffed bucket with a shadow across his face from his baseball cap.

His van will most likely be blocking the ATM drive through. You'll only see his face when his head turns up towards the sun to tell you, along with the other dozens of people, that the ATM is out of order.

As soon as the word "hood" came out of my mouth, Dallas abruptly interrupted me. "You're not hood. You're a townie. You're a fighter, a babe. You like R&B. You're sweet and you're salty." I gave him a puzzled look and proceeded with my question, "What's a townie?" He laughed at me. He always laughs at me, even when I'm serious, which makes me self-conscious. With an age gap of 16 years, I felt naïve whenever I wanted to know something I didn't fully understand.

In order to explain this foreign terminology, Dallas had to give me some background knowledge. "Okay, townie. A townie is a local kid who shows up at a college party. The college is in his/her town, but all the college kids are from another state, privileged (and stuck up). When I was at Colorado College, we were intimidated by the townies. We didn't want them at our parties because we were scared of them. We probably didn't want the competition for the girls and townies had different codes than us. They were a different community."

After his explanation, I came to the conclusion that this new term was used in a derogatory way against me. Despite Dallas' view, "I think the difference between a townie (you) and someone like me, whatever I am, is that I live my life based on the assumption that I'll move, that there's more out there, that happiness is something I can find through exploring the world and that affects how I use my energy and the promises I make. Whereas a townie had his/her whole world in front of her and puts all of her heart and energy into the place she's in. Neither is right or wrong, both have beautiful aspects and big downsides. But that, in my view, is the heart of the difference."

Maybe he wasn't trying to disrespect me, but then again maybe he was. I came from a small town lower, middle-class family. I grew up in Marrero right off the

Barataria Boulevard Exit on Avenue B, close to the Fourth Street side. My church, my school, my first job, my family, my friends, and the homes I've lived in were all in my community, the Westbank. Everything I've ever known to know is in my community. As much as I didn't want to be a townie...I was.

Dallas tried to reassure me, "I called you a townie because you were born and raised in New Orleans and had never really been anywhere else. I called you a townie as a compliment. I see you as authentic, real. Not trying to fit some stuck up idea of who you should be and how you should fit in." But I was indignant.

## Sal's Seafood

When you drive up further up Barataria Boulevard, you'll see Sal's Seafood. You can see a five-foot mountain of oyster shells from the main street. You can see the workers loading off fresh seafood from their worn out pick-up trucks and other workers boiling seafood under the pavilion that is attached to the restaurant. When you pull off in the loose, rocky white gravel in front of the restaurant you can smell a fishy odor in the air. The kind that would make you throw up if you weren't a local. There is dim lighting inside of the restaurant and the tables were covered in a thick, sticky plastic table cloth. That is, until our waitress came over and put down a nice fresh sheet of newspaper. That's when I knew our seafood was about to come out soon.

In the meantime, we ate the entire rectangular basket full of crackers and butter that was already set on the table. My dad always wanted a second basket. He told my brother and me that when he was little instead of eating cereal he would eat unsalted crackers and milk. I assumed that's why he would eat the most because his brain was hard-wired to do so. When our boiled seafood was ready, the workers would come and pour it out all over our table, creating an instant sauna with spicy steam kissing our faces.

We stayed in there for hours until every last piece of shrimp was peeled and crawfish was eaten. I could



never eat that much food so to pass the time I would watch the shrimp juice slowly drown the obnoxiously happy people in the newspaper. My brother and I made the most disgusting concoctions known to man. We had a competition to see who could make the most rancid. The rules were always the same: we could only use the things that were already on the table like Mayo, ketchup, salt, pepper, lemons, crackers, crawfish carcass, shrimp juice, and left-over soda. Maybe a couple of pieces of gun left under the table. Now that I am a waitress, I feel like I would have killed the children who created these vomit worthy concoctions. I feel sorry for the waitress who had to clean up our mess and I pray that my parents tipped her well.

Every time I pass Sal's Seafood before turning on to August Avenue where my paternal grandparents lived, and where my father grew up, I remember a photo that's stapled to a worn-out yellow piece of paper with messy script on it. It says, "My two brothers standing. My father sitting at oyster camp." On the back of the photo in worn script it says, "Joseph, Pierre, Uncle Young, and Kerner Leco. #2." It was my grandfathers' photograph. Now it lays around my house. In the picture, there are mountains of oysters around my great-grandfather, Pierre Leco. He was at Manila Village, a barrier island off of Barataria Bay where Filipino-Americans like him worked.

My father, Vincent Joseph Paul Leco Jr., was raised by a Cajun French mother and a Filipino father. His skin is a tan, like top of a freshly cooked golden brown biscuit. His hair was short and black, but it has faded a bit and is losing his color as he gets older. At first glance, you would think he has brown eyes, but if you take the time to look closely his eyes are multi-colored. I love to get close to his face and admire all of the different colors swirled together. I see red, brown, green, and specks of black almost like little freckles. I inherited blue eyes, and if you look closely at my left eye, you can spy a little brown freckle. I like to think I got it from my dad. He is a very big man, very strong, and very smart. He wears a serious stare when he isn't speaking. Reserved, he is actually a very comical person. He doesn't like to smile with his teeth. He never says so, but I know. But when he thinks something is very amusing, he flashes a full smile with his teeth. I love seeing my dad this way.

For as long as I've known my father, he has always called me *Nou-noun*. I asked him why. He says that it just came to him one day, but it is a term of endearment in French for small child. When I was young, we lived on Alison Drive in Gretna in a big beautiful brick house with forest green window shutters. On the porch was a wooden white swing that my father built. Whenever I woke up in the middle of the night feeling sick, he would pick me up and carry me down the stairs and swing me on the swing. I remember looking to him on a cool clear night with the stars and moon out before falling asleep in his arms. Other nights, it would take hours for me to fall asleep. I've always saw this as a sign that he was very patient.

## Manila Village

I wanted to know about my dad and where his family was from; my family. It was very rarely that we saw my dad's side of the family.

**Shelbey:** Who were your grandparents?

**Vinnie:** Pierre Leco, Alberta Leco, Earl Boudin Sr., and Gladys Guidry Boudin.

**Shelbey:** Do you remember them? Could you tell me about them. Where were they from?

**Vinnie:** Yes, I remember them. I know my mother's parents are from Raceland and I know they're from Cajun French descent. I know my dad's parents are from German and Filipino descent and they were from Dulac, south of Houma.

**Shelbey:** What were they like? Did they do anything in particular that you could remember?"

**Vinnie:** I remember making blackberry dumplings and cooking seafood-based products. I remember eating dried shrimp over there. That's the kind of stuff they did every day. They went out south of Houma and in Grand Caillou, and caught shrimp. They would boil the little bitty ones and put'em out in the sun. They would dehydrate them. After, they put'em in a sack and make all the peelins fall off by beating the sack around. That's what you see in them little packages at the store.

Your paternal great grandparents were out working in Manila Village. It was a reef that was built off of oyster shells. It was a farmer's market with a general store on water with seafood. They would trawl, and trap muskrat, otter, nutria, mink, rabbits, pelts. They would go out and shuck the oysters there with the oyster boat. They'd load'em and shuck them there. Instead all the boats coming up through Lafitte, they would stay there in Manila Village and off-load their stuff. They had bigger boats that would process the stuff all right there and ship it 'upfront."

**Shelbey:** "Up the river?"

**Vinnie:** Up the Barataria waterway. They called it Manila Village because there were a lot of Filipinos there. I was Filipino on my dad's side. My grandpaw was out there. You'd see'em sittin' oon top of oyster shells. My great-grandpaw came from the Philippines and was part of the Filipino movement comin in.



The Leco family's boat.

My grandparents were born and raised out there. That's how they were livin. My parents were part'a that too, but they started migrating "upfront." All you can see now of Manila Village is on your depth finder. You can see the water go from 5 feet...4...4...3...2...1. Then it's a circle in the water and they got some pickets there that's the only thing left. Over time, it just washed away.

**Shelbey:** You went there?

**Vinnie:** Yeah, I fished there. When I first went there, it was only a piling of oyster shells. I went in the 80's and 90s, the piling was sticking out the water. You could still see a couple of the oyster shells.

**Shelbey:** Did Paw Paw go out there?"

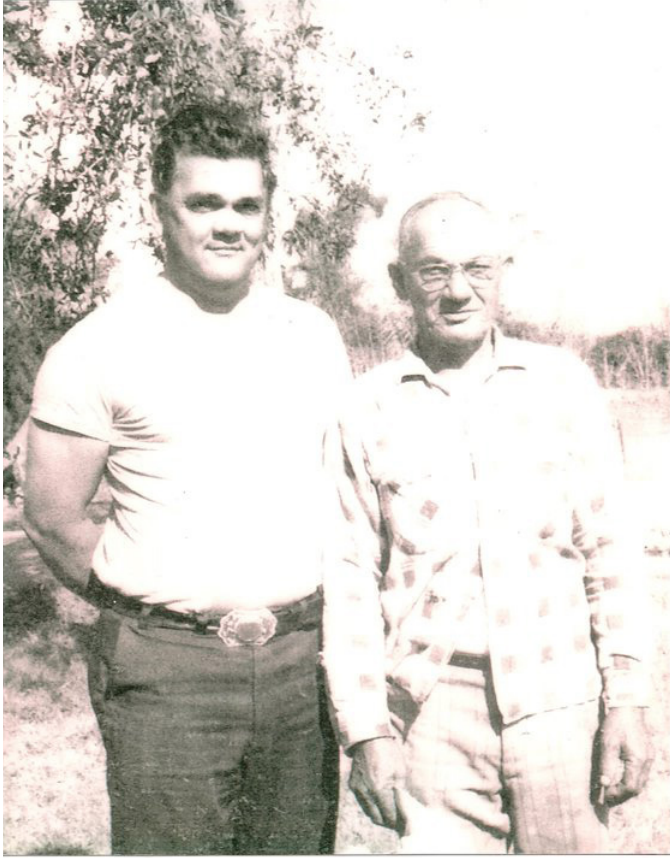
**Vinnie:** Yeah, when he was little. I mean, his daddy was there. His brothers were there. He the baby of the family, but when we was five and six years old, he was out there. When he came back from school, he went out there. On the weekend, he was out there."

I came from a family of fisherman who worked day in and day out on the oyster reef they called Manila Village.

## Immaculate Conception

My church, Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, located on Seventh Street and Avenue C, is where I received all of my holy sacraments. It still stands today and it's not even a block away from my home. I could walk to it in two minutes. It is a normal sized church constructed of bricks. A huge glass triangle sits off to the right of the structure. Further to the right is a cast iron fence. If you peep through the vines that cover it, you can see the priests relaxing on a well-flourished garden patio. They live in the building to the far-most right of the structure.

To the far-most left, there is a little shrine with an iron door attached to it with windows on all sides covered with iron bars. One would go inside to light votive candles or prayer candles for the soul of a deceased love one or a sick person. If you choose to light a candle, you give yourself up to God, and pray for your intention. Above the prayer candles is the statue of St. Lucy holding a dish of eye balls. In religion class when I was very young, we went to visit the shrine and I vividly remember seeing the statue of St. Lucy for the first time. I couldn't help but stare at her and I always felt like the eyeballs in the dish were staring at me.



Vincent Leco Sr. with his grandfather Pierre "Pete" Leco.

The front doors of the church are made of glass. There are two angels facing each other on the doors and the handles are heavy bricks of gold. If you look down the main aisle, you can see the triangular shaped tabernacle sitting on the altar towards the back of the church. To your immediate left, there is an intricately designed heavy glass bowl of holy water. Whoever enters the church must dip their hand in it and make the sign of the cross over their forehead.

The main aisle is made of old white terrazzo speckled flooring and above the altar is a giant crucifix of Jesus. Behind him there is an even bigger collage of thick colorful stained glass. When the sun shines through, it displays an arrangement of colors on the floor of the church. To the right and left of the main aisle are medium brown wooden church pews. The columns on the far right and left of the pews depict the Stations of the Cross and to the far right the walls of the church are made up of multiple stained glass windows with a different saint on each of them. What I remember most vividly are the light fixtures. They are long oc-

tagon lanterns trimmed in gold metal attached to the ceiling by a gold chain. The light they illuminate was always dim and yellow.

As a child I would sit in the church pew, and I could never see the altar until I went up to receive a blessing from the priest during Communion. In the meantime I would just look up to the ceiling and study the light fixtures to keep myself occupied.

When I was young, my parents took my brother and me to eight o'clock mass every Sunday. When we lived on Alison Drive in Gretna, my mom dressed us in our "Sunday's best" clothes. She would load us up in outdated white Nissan Maximus that smelled bad in the backseat because little Vinnie had spilled milk all over the seat one morning when my mom stopped at Coffee & to get us doughnut holes for breakfast and decided to not say anything until we got to school. My mom, brother, and I always sat ready in the car waiting for my dad. He was never ready, ever.

My mom yelled at him out the passenger window from the driver's seat. "Hurry up Vinnie! We're going to be late! You always do this." He swung himself into the small car making this funny noise that I wish I could describe or mimic, but can't. He always made these little weird noises to try to be funny. He rarely got frustrated and most of the time was in a good mood. As my mother drove, he held onto the grey plastic handle piece above the window ready to jump out. He was too big for the small car. He always seemed smooshed.

We never ate breakfast before church because my dad said we couldn't. We had to wait until after church because we had to fast until we got communion. This logic doesn't make sense to me now because we weren't old enough to receive communion. He probably just didn't want us to complain about being hungry in church.

One of the main moral teachings my parents instilled in my brother and I was to love everyone despite race, religion, culture, personality, where a person





Shelbey's grandparents, Dolores and Librorio Palermo, on their wedding day.

was from, or what a person did. We were not allowed to judge people based on material wealth. We were taught to never judge others at all. We were taught to love everyone. We were taught to turn the other cheek when others treated us unfairly. It was our job to always be kind. We were taught to be just. There were many times I had a difficult time turning the other cheek when people were mean to me. I wanted to retaliate, but most of the time I didn't.

## Moonlighting

I was curious as to how my parents met. I asked my mom first. She told the story in a casual tone, "One night, I went out with Julie to Moonlighting. It was a bar in the old Belle Promenade Mall. It's ain't there no more. It's where the Walmart is now on Barataria. It was two for Two Long Island Night. I was with a bunch of my guy friends and your daddy was trying to talk to me. But I didn't like him. He went and order a seafood appetizer, but I didn't eat it. And Daddy wanted to know why I was with that thing." I was confused, "Uhm thing? What thing?"

She said, "My friend Rhet. He kinds of reminds me of Hill. He had long, curly brown hair. Then I just kept seeing your daddy all over the place. Every time I went out, he was there. I didn't like him, but he took me out on a couple of dates and then he grew on me. That's how we met."

My dad told me a similar story, "Moonlighting was a local place. I saw her with all her guy work friends. I went and bought the cheapest appetizer they had on the menu. While the guys were all smakin' down eatin' the appetizer I went and talk to her." I was wondering if my dad knew that my mom didn't initially like him that night so I asked, "Did she like you?"

"Well yeah, I mean, I assumed she like me. She was talking to me that night and I took her out." So my parents basically met at a non-existing bar Moonlighting in the equivalent of an Applebee's in the Old Belle Promenade Mall on a Tuesday night. My mom was still living with her mom and dad on Belle Terre and my dad was living on August Lane. Love is a peculiar thing, and it pairs up peculiar people.

## Feast of St. Joseph

My mother, Joy Marie Palermo Leco, was raised by my French grandmother, Dolores Delaune Palermo, and by my Sicilian grandfather, Librorio Raymond Palermo. She is a petite woman. Her skin is a light, olive complexion. She has small, dark brown eyes. They are so dark that sometimes I can't see her pupils. Her hair was once very curly, but after years of flat-ironing it tends to remain consistently straight. I admire her short hair. Mine is short now and I wonder what she would look like today if she kept her natural curls, since she praises mine.

My grandfather, Librorio Raymond Palermo, told me that my family from in Italy left their homes to come to America. His grandfather, Joseph, and his brothers came to America from a small town in Itlay where they had an orchid. Green thumbs that have been passed down through the generations. My grandfather has his own orange and satsuma trees. The satsuma is my favorite because the fruit is the sweetest. He taught me everything about them, from what seasons they bloom in and how to pick them correctly.

In March, we prepare for the Feast of St. Joseph in churches and people's homes. Each year, my grandfather grows his own fennel and brings them to the altar.

My mom and aunts get together to make anise cookies and the Easter cookie, *pupa cu l'ovas*. Nobody ever wants to make the *pupa cu l'ova* because they require a lot of work. You have to make sweet bread dough to create a base for the dyed Easter egg to rest in. After, you have to braid the dough and make a cross over the egg. Once the cookies are finished baking, you've got to make a bunch of different colored icings. Lastly, you have to decorate the cookie in bright colored icing and sprinkles. I have taken on the tradition of making them every year. It brings me great joy when I bring them to the altar to hear, "Oh, I haven't had a *pupa cu l'ova* since I was a kid on Easter morning." Or my favorite, "God bless you, I've been refrigerating the same *pupa cu l'ova* for four years now! I have these fresh ones to display."

Every year my mom, along with all the little old Italian ladies who never seem to die, tell me that I need to steal a lemon from the altar. First of all, stealing is a big no-no and they want me to commit such a crime in a church on the most important day for Sicilian Roman Catholics. Secondly, I'm supposed to steal the lemon IN SECRET and NOBODY is supposed to see me stealing it because if they do, it won't work. The ladies tell me that if I am successful, by the time of the next St. Joseph's day, I'll have a husband. I've been stealing the blessed lemon from the altar for years now and I still have no husband. At this rate it'll never happen.

Still, I follow all the Italian traditions. Like carrying a fava bean, my "lucky bean," in my wallet at all times. It's supposed to bring good luck and fortune in my life. If you look at my grandfather's wallet, you'll see the fava bean from the outside of his wallet, If you took the bean out, you could still see the impression. Just like the fava bean, my grandfather has created a lasting impression of Sicilian culture on to me. He told me a story once about a man who religiously carried his fava bean in his front t-shirt pocket. One day, when he entered a gas station store, there was a robbery. The armed man met his eye and aimed his gun at the Italian man's chest. The man closed his eyes and prayed, for he had accepted his death. When he



Shelbey's grandfather, Librorio Palermo, in front of a St. Joseph's altar on the Westbank. Photograph courtesy of the Leco family.

opened his eyes, the bullet ricocheted off of his fava bean, and he lived to see another day. My grandfather swears on his life that the story is true. He is very adamant about my brother and I carrying our fava beans.

Another big Italian tradition is having a prayer card of St. Joseph stashed away in your car somewhere so that you don't die a sudden death, but a happy one. St. Joseph is the patron saint of departed souls. My grandmother, Dolores Palermo, was a devoted Christian, and it was comforting to know she died on his feast day. St. Joseph is also the patron saint of immigrants. All of my ancestors left their homes to come to America. I am an established townie, a Sicilian, Cajun French, Filipina woman from the Westbank, and my ancestors wouldn't want it any other way.