way through every orifice in the old part, shooting through cracks, bending around corners, slipping through the great stone arches at the edge of the port. Follow the light and see where it leads you.

It will take you past a street corner where men gather to eat simmered offal from clandestine street carts. (Don't fill up before dinner!) Past the window of a workshop on Via IV Aprile, where inside an old man with wild hair whittles wood into magnificent little toys. (NO PICTURES! an exasperated sign reminds you.) On to Via Alessandro Paternostro, to places such as Bar Salvatore, where people fill the streets in the early hours of the evening for an *aperitivo*, that much-beloved Italian way to warm up for dinner with free bar snacks and booze. (Make it a spritz: prosecco, Aperol, and soda water, the closest thing to a Sicilian sunset in a glass.)

It's not all postcard pretty, of course. Much of Palermo can feel like an archaeological dig suddenly suspended: ancient buildings roped off and abandoned, corridors of plywood that stretch on without meaning. On the street corners of even the nicest parts of the city's historic district, you'll find garbage stacked up in mountains of stench and decay—a by-product of southern Italy's penchant for strikes, labor disputes, and Mafia mischief making. When I walked by one such prodigious pile on Via Butera, one of Palermo's most elegant streets, and snapped a photo, a man in an apron came out of the corner bar and barked at me, "Great, there you go! A beautiful memory of Palermo!"

By now you probably need another drink. If you're up past midnight and thirsty, you'll find your way to the Vucciria—a small piazza with a few snaking tributaries where the city funnels its hungriest and thirstiest citizens. During the day, when the Vucciria Market stalls line the streets, pushing everything from swordfish to Grana Padano to fake Prada, you can slip in to Taverna Azzurra, sip a €1 glass of marsala from the bodega barrel and listen to the old men talk about Silvio Berlusconi and Serie A in a language no other Italians would understand. (Sicilians—*palermitani* in particular—speak a dialect that bears only a passing resemblance to the language spoken on the mainland.)

But on a weekend night you'll find the piazza transformed into a pulsating street party. Grills set up around the sunken piazza sizzle with the scent of *stigghiola*, goat or lamb intestines wrapped around leeks and cooked until they crackle. Music pulses from parts unknown. There is no apparent order: drinks appear magically, music arrives from sources unknown, and smoke, a mixture of charred crustaceans and African hash, hangs thick in the air as throngs of young, drunk *palermitani* and a few lucky visitors push the night until it buckles.

"Palermo is changing. You can see it everywhere," says Nicoletta Polo Lanza Tomasi, the duchess of Palma. We're sitting in the patio gardens of the seventeenth-century Palazzo Lanza Tomasi, the former palace of Giuseppe di Lampedusa. He lived upstairs in the 1950s as he went from café to café in Palermo, stitching together the scenes that would finally become one of the great masterpieces of Sicilian literature, *The Leopard*.

He would not live to see it published. In fact, just days before succumbing to a tumor on his lung in the spring of 1957, he received his latest rejection letter from the Italian publishing world, a final injustice in a life that had accumulated more than a few as it ground to a halt. He had left his beloved Palermo for Rome, hoping for a cure that would never come. Before setting off for his deathbed to the north, he left a letter to Gioacchino Lanza di Assaro, a distant cousin who had grown so close to Lampedusa in his later years that he had been adopted as his son. He knew his days were numbered:

My dearest Giò,
I am anxious that, even with the curtain down, my voice should reach you to convey to you how grateful I am for the comfort your presence has brought me these last two or three years of my life which have been so painful and somber but which would have been quite simply tragic were it not for you.

He goes on to implore dear Giò to find a publisher, a desire echoed in his tersely worded will ("Needless to say, this does not mean having it published at my heirs' expense; I should consider this a gross humiliation"). Giò did just that; a few months after Lampedusa's death, Feltrinelli Editore in Milan bought the manuscript—and the rights to one of the best-selling novels in Italian history.

For anyone looking to better understand Italy before it was Italy (and Sicily before it was part of Italy), *The Leopard* could be your history book. Set in southern Italy in 1860, in the final throes of the revolution that eventually unified the disparate city-states into the Kingdom of Italy, it grapples with crumbling order, class warfare, and the challenges of a world on the verge of irreversible change. The novel's eventual hero, the dashing liberal Tancredi, is based on none other than Gioacchino himself.

Back then, Gioacchino was one of Palermo's most promising young men—of a respected family, fiercely intelligent, a rising talent in the world of classical music. In 1972, he was named the director of Teatro Massimo, and eventually he went on to run many of Italy's most important opera houses (Rome, Bologna, Naples), as well as the Italian Cultural Institute in New York.

Like most of Palermo's upper class, he left Sicily for the better part of four decades, but in the 1980s, Gioacchino returned with his wife, Nicoletta Polo, and the duke and duchess set about restoring Lampedusa's port-side palazzo, bombed by the Allies in 1943, to its former glory, including converting the extra apartments downstairs into Butera 28, one of Palermo's finest accommodations.

"Thirty years ago, when I arrived, Palermo looked as if the war had just finished," the duchess tells me over afternoon tea in the garden. "Most people had moved into the new part of town. The old part was abandoned. Now we're seeing the rebirth of the historic center. Architects, artists, contractors are all buying and refurbishing this area."

It makes for a great story, one you've probably heard before: an ancient city fallen into disrepair suddenly rising like a phoenix from the ashes of its former self. Sounds lovely, but no narrative in Palermo is ever so linear. Change is under way here, as it is everywhere, but traditions die hard: the offal still simmers, the old couples still shuffle over the cobblestones, the trash still builds up in impossible piles. If there is one striking change to Palermo, it's the one Mayor Orlando heralds: Ballarò and the blooming of an immigrant nation.

The duke is less optimistic in his assessment of the city. I climb the stairs to see Gioacchino one evening around midnight. Whiskey in hand, he shows me the art gallery and library, the penciled Picasso sketch of his mother ("one of the most beautiful women in Palermo"), and, of course, the original manuscript of *The Leopard*, now kept in a glass case with its own lighting system. I tell the duke I'm rereading the novel, inspired by my stay in one of the downstairs apartments. He smiles broadly. "It is a magnificent work, isn't it?" He says it with the emotion of someone who keeps it on his nightstand. "Remember, it's not a historical novel, it's a psychological one."

The conversation turns toward the city buzzing down below. "The man has lost his wit," he says about the mayor and his more grandiose visions of a new Palermo. "We are in a moment of great change. Italians don't want to be peasants anymore. Tourism one day will be the great business of Palermo, but not now. Not yet. The old city is still abandoned."

The duke tells me that 250,000 people once lived in Palermo's *centro storico*. Today, even with the recent uptick, that number is closer to 25,000, and most of those are immigrants. For the duke, much of the challenge starts with a lack of deep-pocketed citizens who could fuel a revival. "Many of the rich left. They went to Manhattan to buy real estate. That's why we're left without an upper class."

We step out into the warm, sticky humidity of the Sicilian summer. The upstairs palace terrace overlooks the gardens below and, below them, the line of trattorie and gelato shops that runs adjacent to the port.

The duke and duchess of Palma.

And beyond them, the Mediterranean and the bobbing lights of fishing boats and merchant ships trafficking these waters. I imagine one of them to be an official vessel dispatched from Lampedusa, filled with the latest cast of anxious migrants blinking expectantly into the night as the lights of the city grow brighter.

We stand there, covered in sweat, talking quietly under the din of passing traffic, as if sharing state secrets, uncertain when to call it a night.

"I hope he can get it together," he says after a long silence, referring to Orlando. "There's so much work to be done."

Just what that work is depends on where you're standing: on a blanket in Ballarò or above the palace gardens? That's the thing about Palermo; its beauty bends to the eye of the beholder. What is it: a hobbled old man or a wise and elegant matron? a broken promise or a dream still in the making?

Or both?

Lampedusa saw this coming decades ago, immortalizing the central paradox of Palermo in *The Leopard*'s most famous line, spoken by the brave Tancredi, the character the duke himself inspired:

Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi.

If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.