

**Pamphlet #7**  
**Not by a nose**  
**Winterberry**

JOSIAH OBER

## NOT BY A NOSE

*The triumph of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, 31 B.C.*

*To what extent does love exert a role in counterfactual history? Some would dismiss that as a purely Gallic question. Indeed, Josiah Ober notes here, the seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal opined that if the Egyptian queen Cleopatra had possessed a less comely nose, "the whole face of the earth might have been changed." Would unpleasing looks have kept the soldier-politician Mark Antony, one of the most powerful men in the known world, from losing his heart to her, thus taking the first steps on the path to defeat at Actium and, as a consequence, the elevation of the first emperor of Rome, his rival Octavian Augustus? Was love the culprit?*

*To Pascal (and earlier, Shakespeare), the answer couldn't be clearer. "He who would fully know human vanity has but to consider the causes and effects of love," Pascal wrote in his *Pensées*. The causes of an infatuation might be trifling but the effects could be fearful, moving "earth, princes, armies, the whole world." Pascal was no doubt being hard on love, as well as on Antony and Cleopatra, but such concerns have made for an enduring tale of human folly. Why not say it? Cleopatra, apparently, was no beauty. Was this the nose that launched a thousand ships? No matter. She had other more fetching attributes. According to the Greek biographer Plutarch, who wrote within a century of Actium, "Her beauty (as it is reported) was not so passing, as unmatched as other women, nor yet such as upon present view did enamor men with her; but so sweet was her company and conversation that a man could not possibly but be taken." Cleopatra*

was captivating in another respect. Sex in the ancient world had its practical uses, as golf does in ours. In the ornate tents, barges, and bed chambers of the high and mighty, deals were made and alliances, political and dynastic, were cemented: Lack of virtue was its own reward, and Cleopatra was for much of her life a winner.

No Actium? No gilt-edged suicides? Ober considers some of the alternatives. With Antony and Cleopatra securely enthroned and their progeny guaranteed a future, their capital, Alexandria, might have been the other eternal city of the world. The whole evolving nature of religion would have been different: remember, Actium was fought in 31 B.C., at the threshold of the Christian era.

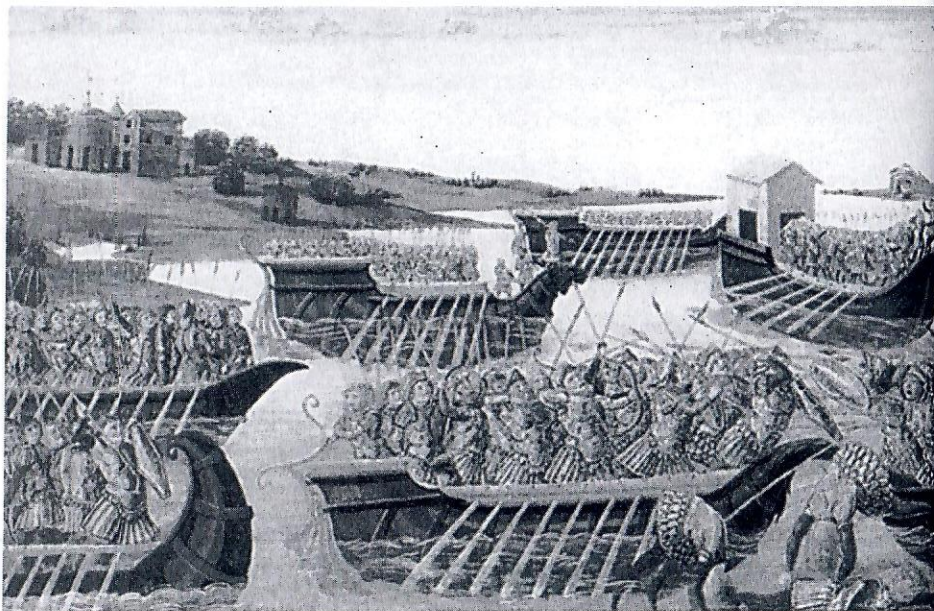
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ON A BARREN HILL on the western coast of Greece, above the site of the ancient city of Nicopolis ("Victory City") and some seventy-five kilometers by sea southeast of the popular Greek island of Corfu, there stands a unique and seldom-visited ancient monument. The monument takes the form of a low parapet, well built of massive stone blocks. On the face of the wall the occasional visitor who stumbles upon this place is struck by the deep and peculiar cuttings. Careful work by archaeologists has shown that the cuttings were specifically designed to accommodate the sawn-off ends of great oared warships; when the monument was still intact the wall bristled with delicately arched and highly decorated wooden ship sterns. This is a monument to a great naval victory.

The wall is Roman, dating to the age of the emperor Augustus. The ships that were mutilated to create this monument once belonged to Mark Antony. The monument was built by Antony's one-time partner, brother-in-law, and rival for the role of chief man in the Roman empire: Octavian, later to be called Augustus Caesar, the first emperor of Rome. Octavian Augustus erected this monument and founded the city of Nicopolis as lasting memorials to his most important naval victory, the Battle of Actium (31 B.C.), at which Antony—along with Antony's ally and lover, Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt—was decisively defeated. Actium richly deserves its reputation as one of the turning-point battles of Western history.

Actium was not the first important battle fought between armies of Romans on Greek soil. As part of the Roman province of Macedonia, Greece had served as unwilling host to several sanguinary clashes between Roman citizen-armies, led by ferociously ambitious Roman politician-generals. Greece had the unhappy distinction of marking the boundary between the western Roman Empire, centered in Italy and extending to Spain, and the eastern Roman Empire, which extended well into Anatolia (modern

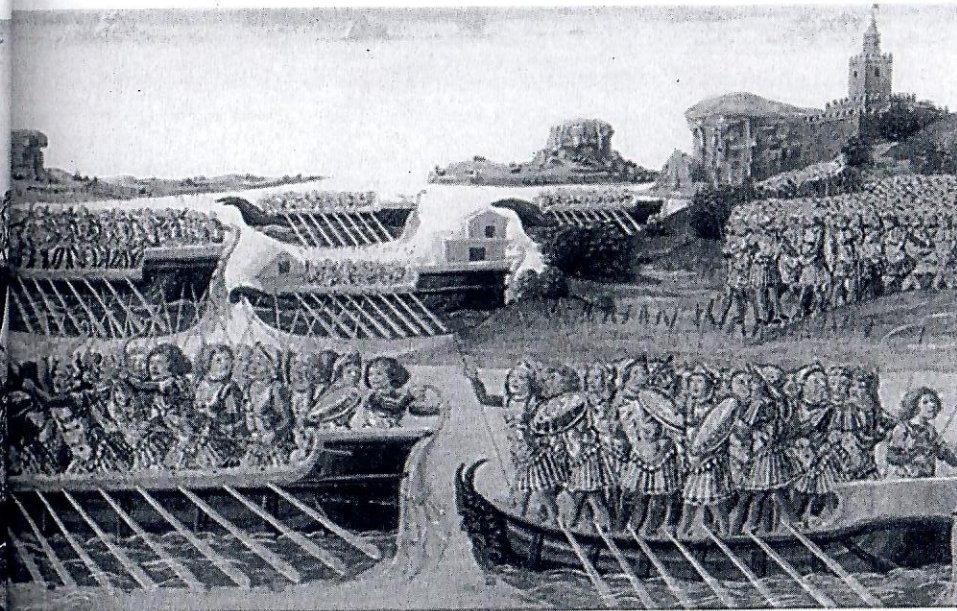


ACTIUM: EMPIRE LOST, EMPIRE ESTABLISHED

The Italian Renaissance artist Neroccio de' Landi did this fanciful tempera of the Battle of Actium, where Octavian (who would soon proclaim himself the Emperor Caesar Augustus) defeated

Turkey) and as far east as Syria. Cornelius Sulla had consolidated his position by victories in Greece in the mid-80s B.C. before returning to Italy to smash the supporters of Marius. Then Julius Caesar had crushed his rival, Pompey the Great, at Thessalian Pharsalus, in northeastern Greece. Next, at Macedonian Philippi, Octavian and Antony, at that time still allies, had eliminated the threat posed by Julius Caesar's assassins, the "Liberators," Brutus and Cassius. But Actium was the finale.

At Actium, Octavian defeated his last serious rival and so could finally proceed with his master plan: No longer would the aristocratic Senate dominate an ancient republic; rather the Senate would now be a rubber stamp for a new imperial form of government, a kingdom in all but name in which true power would be vested (if still somewhat covertly) in a single man. Actium also spelled the end of 300 years of Macedonian rule over an independent Egypt. After the battle, Octavian pursued Antony and

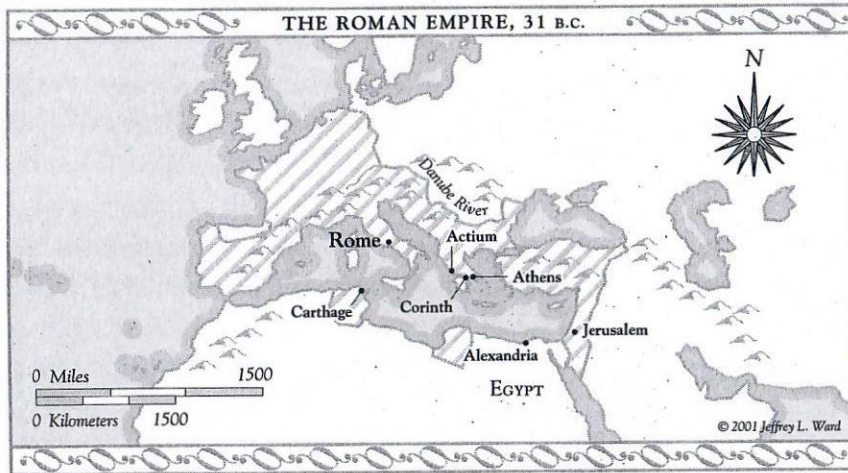
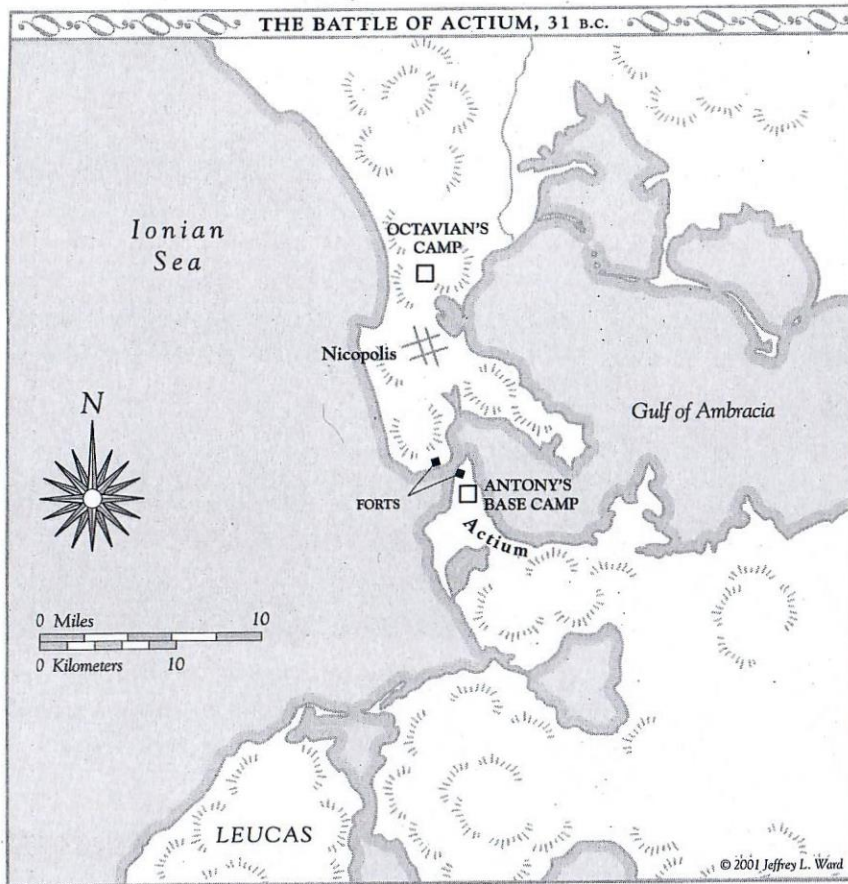


Antony and his ally and lover, the Egyptian queen Cleopatra.

(Neroccio de' Landi, 1447-1500, and workshop, *The Battle of Actium*. North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation)

Cleopatra to Egypt. When Cleopatra committed suicide by asp bite rather than accepting the fate of passively marching in Octavian's triumphal parade, the last of the great Hellenistic Greek kingdoms passed into the control of the Roman state. Or, more precisely, into the private estate of the Roman emperor.

With Octavian's victory at Actium, the Roman conquest of the eastern Mediterranean was complete, and the long reign of the Roman emperors was inaugurated—for good (Claudius, Marcus Aurelius) and for ill (Caligula, Nero). And ever since, historians have speculated: Must it have gone that way? After all, Octavian, for all his political acumen, was not noted for his military talents; whereas Mark Antony was among the most skillful generals of his day. Antony brought a vast army and an imposing navy to Actium. How are we to account for Octavian's victory in this epoch-making confrontation? What factor might have tipped the scales of



war in the other direction, and what might the world have looked like in the aftermath of an Antonine victory?

In one of the most celebrated counterfactual speculations in Western literature, Pascal suggested (in his *Pensées*) that if Cleopatra had been born with a somewhat larger nose, Mark Antony would have defeated Octavian at Actium, and thus the entire course of Roman imperial history (and so, of Western civilization) would have been altered. Pascal's classic "what if?" is predicated on the assumption that Antony was madly in love with Cleopatra, and that his wild passion for her fatally clouded his judgment as a general and a politician. Love, then, was the key factor in Antony's miscalculations in the years leading up to the decisive encounter on the western coast of Greece: Rome was saddled with a long series of emperors because Antony lost his heart over a cute nose.

Pascal's whimsical thought experiment is memorable, enjoying all the parsimonious elegance of "for want of a nail . . ." yet with the added elements of romance and tragically flawed historical characters. Ironically, however, the ancient accounts of Cleopatra do not describe her as a great beauty. Plutarch, who wrote biographies of both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, claims that Cleopatra's musical voice and great force of character rendered her delightful company, but the biographer notes that she was not particularly good-looking. Indeed the only surviving contemporary portraits of her, on coins minted under Cleopatra's own authority in Egyptian Alexandria, depict the famous queen with a sharp jutting chin and a very prominent hooked nose.

Yet even if we leave out the most obviously problematic elements of Pascal's scenario (the assumptions that male passion must be stimulated primarily by a woman's physical beauty; that women with large noses cannot be regarded as beautiful; and thus that Antony would not have been passionately misled by a large-nosed Cleopatra), his counterfactual is subject to correction on its most basic (and perhaps most attractive) grounds: that is, on the notion that the course of human history was changed by romantic love.

There is no doubt that Antony and Cleopatra were physically intimate (he acknowledged as legitimate his three children by her), or that they

contracted a lasting and fateful alliance. But a properly critical reading of the ancient sources leads quickly to the conclusion that there is little reason to suppose that Antony's failure at Actium was a product of foolish infatuation. The real story, patiently restored by a generation of Roman historians, is less elegant, perhaps less romantic, but more satisfyingly complicated and ultimately more historically interesting. The real story of the events leading up to the great battle of Actium suggests that Pascal was right in suggesting that Octavian's victory was far from inevitable—but quite wrong to predicate that somewhat unlikely victory on the biological accident of a petite nose.

The decades leading up to the battle of Actium featured some colorful historical characters, but the era was haunted by a pale ghost: the spirit of Julius Caesar. Caesar had precipitated the second phase of Rome's civil wars when he crossed the Rubicon in arms in 49 B.C. He subsequently defeated his rivals in a series of brilliant campaigns, only to end up assassinated by a group of his closest friends on the Ides of March 44 B.C. Caesar had never declared himself emperor, but the assassins had feared that he was about to do so. He had certainly prepared the way for a new form of government in Rome, one that would take account of the dramatic growth of Roman power and the outstanding political importance of those who could command the loyalty of Rome's highly trained legions. Caesar rose to power on the strength of his undeniable military genius. He had built a reputation as an indomitable warrior, having fought successfully on disparate battle grounds: from naval incursions on the coasts of Britain to prolonged sieges in the towns of Gaul to great set battles in Germany, Greece, and Anatolia to running street fights in Egyptian Alexandria.

It was during Caesar's mopping-up campaign in Alexandria in 48 B.C. that the tough-minded fifty-two-year-old civil warrior had encountered twenty-one-year-old Cleopatra VII, who was then in the middle of her own civil war with her brother and sometime husband, Ptolemy XIII. Cleopatra and her brother were descendents of Ptolemy I, a Macedonian nobleman who had fought for Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death in 323 B.C. Ptolemy I seized the throne of Egypt by force of arms. The throne had been occupied by his linear descendants ever since—and they had taken up

the practice of brother-sister marriage early on in order to ensure that rulership of Egypt would remain a Ptolemaic family affair. Not surprisingly the family was not a happy one and young Cleopatra immediately grasped the advantages to be gained by contracting an alliance with the *de facto* ruler of the most powerful state the ancient world had ever seen. Accordingly, she arranged an introduction (reportedly by having herself smuggled into Caesar's apartments concealed inside a carpet). Making a quick assessment the situation, Caesar declared for Cleopatra. Ptolemy XIII was soon dead and with Caesar's legions behind her, Cleopatra was named undisputed queen of Egypt. She accompanied Caesar on a well-publicized tour down the Nile and, hardly coincidentally, the son she subsequently bore was nicknamed Caesarion—Little Caesar.

No doubt Julius Caesar found the young heiress to the throne of the Ptolemies attractive, but Egypt was much too important a place to allow romantic sentiment to decide questions of long-term leadership. As a leading Roman aristocrat, Caesar had a wide choice of sexual partners, and he was much too serious a politician to throw his support behind anyone he regarded as less than fully competent. Cleopatra was young, indeed, and a woman, but she had all the other prerequisites to be a successful client-ruler at the fringes of Roman authority. She had the right Ptolemaic bloodline, and so was likely to be accepted by her Egyptian and Greek-speaking subjects. And she had demonstrated in the civil war that she had the ruthless determination to do whatever was necessary to gain and hold power: she would never be swayed by family sentiment to spare a potential rival.

But Cleopatra had more than birthright and ruthlessness, she had an especially clear apprehension of what it took to rule the diverse peoples of Egypt—native Egyptians, Greco-Macedonians, and Jews were only three of the most prominent ethnicities. Each ethnic group resident in Egypt had its own historical relationship to the Ptolemaic throne and its own religious rituals. Several had their own quarter in the thriving capital city of Alexandria, and their own strongholds in the vast agricultural hinterland formed by the annual flooding of the Nile. Unlike any of her monolingually Greek speaking royal ancestors, Cleopatra learned at least some of the multiple languages used in her kingdom: she was the first Macedonian ruler of Egypt

to speak Egyptian. Cleopatra was intensely aware of the complex set of political, social, economic, and especially religious roles that a successful ruler of Egypt (and client of Rome) would be required to play. And she played these with great finesse: appearing in Egyptian costume in the guise of the goddess Isis for her native Egyptian subjects, promoting Dionysian festivals for the Greeks, and leaving the Jews alone to practice their distinctive rites.

Cleopatra clearly grasped two vital political facts from the very beginning: First, in the age of Julius Caesar (and his successors) the single key factor in the flourishing of Egypt (and thus the ruler of Egypt) was retaining the favor of Rome—and this meant gaining and retaining the favor of powerful Romans. In Caesar's Rome, politics were very personal indeed—alliances were often made on the basis of kinship. And thus whatever she actually felt for Caesar (and there is no reason to deny that she found him good company: Caesar was a highly cultured man and a brilliant speaker as well as a great general), Cleopatra's best move was to contract an alliance with Rome's most powerful man. If possible, it should be the sort of intimate alliance that would result in progeny. Caesar might never acknowledge, in public and in Rome, that he had a son by the Egyptian queen. But Romans were very serious about ties of blood, and Caesar might be expected to look favorably upon a line of succession that would place his own bastard son on the throne of Egypt.

Second, Cleopatra realized that Egypt was both valuable and a potential problem to the Romans because of its wealth and relative security against invasion by land or sea. That wealth and defensible location helped the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt to weather the fierce and protracted wars of succession that had dragged on for long generations after the death of Alexander. The Romans, for their part, had demonstrated an almost inexhaustible capacity to tap the accumulated wealth of the ancient world—paying the legions, sponsoring the festival games, and feeding the growing population of Rome took a huge amount of money. That constant appetite for wealth had contributed to the complex process by which Rome had absorbed much of the Mediterranean world, and all of the other great Hellenistic kingdoms, into the empire as provinces. Egypt, still technically independent, was a tempting prize. But also a dangerous prize: every Roman province re-

quired a provincial governor, and the competitive Roman aristocrats who dominated the Senate had long been worried about allowing any one of their number to take control of what might quickly become a private fiefdom. And so, Egypt had remained independent, but that independence required playing the game of Roman politics with skill, while making it clear that Egypt's wealth was always available to Rome (or to the right Romans) without the necessity of a war of annexation.

The bottom line, for Julius Caesar, was that Cleopatra was a good choice as queen of Egypt, from every perspective: good for Rome, and good for Caesar. That she was delightful company and bore him a son was icing on the cake, no doubt very tasty icing, but never to be confused with the cake itself.

The assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. threw many career plans into violent disarray and opened up a whole new field of play. The assassins quickly discovered that their "liberation" of Rome from "Caesar the tyrant" was much less popular with the other Romans than they had hoped. They quickly retired to the eastern empire, where they sought to raise money and recruit legionary armies. The most startling single career move was made by Octavian, Caesar's nineteen-year-old adopted son, who got the news of the killing while studying in Greece. Octavian reacted quickly. Sailing to Brundisium on the heel of Italy, he proceeded by road to Rome, picking up a huge retinue of his adoptive father's mustered-out troops along the way. Octavian arrived in Rome as a young man to contend with: that is to say, as a young man at the head of a personal army. Meanwhile, Mark Antony, one of Caesar's most promising lieutenants, had set himself in the forefront of the pro-Caesar loyalists—in part with a rousing public speech in the forum, made famous by Shakespeare ("Friends, Romans, countrymen . . ."). But Antony had dangerous enemies in the Senate, and he soon found himself declared a public enemy and embroiled in a war against senatorial forces in northern Italy. Octavian was dispatched by the Senators (who supposed they could use the youth to their own ends) to help the generals fighting against Antony. But Octavian and Antony found they had interests in common (for the time being at least). In conjunction with a third, well-armed partisan of Caesar, Marcus Lepidus, they joined their forces,

forming the Second Triumvirate (the First Triumvirate, an alliance of Julius Caesar, Pompey the Great, and Marcus Crassus, had dominated Roman politics in the 50s B.C.).

The first duty of the triumvirs was to take revenge upon the assassins, who had by now assembled a considerable force in the East, in large part by extorting "taxes" from the unhappy provincials and by squeezing the client kingdoms of the East. Cleopatra, whose own early career had been so closely tied to Caesar's ascendant star, found herself in a very difficult position. Should she declare openly for the triumvirs and defiantly refuse to allow any fragment of the wealth of Egypt to be sent to build the armies of the so-called Liberators? Or should she play a more subtle game and wait to see who emerged as Rome's next preeminent strong man? In the end, she fended off the most pressing of the financial demands of the Liberators with pleas, not of loyalty to Caesar's memory, but to poverty: It seems that Egypt was suffering from both famine and disease and this prevented her from sending the assassins the ships and men they demanded. Meanwhile, Cleopatra covertly raised her own fleet and set out to sea, ostensibly to bring aid to the triumvirs. But bad weather intervened and the fleet returned to Alexandria without making contact with either friend or foe. Cleopatra was straddling the fence, waiting for the next decisive move in a game that would decide her own fate and that of Egypt. She saw that she could not yet hope to influence the game's outcome and the realization taught her an important lesson: Cleopatra would not again willingly allow herself to be a pawn, passively awaiting what fate might bring.

The forces of the triumvirs, well generated by Antony (Octavian conveniently fell ill and so missed the military action), were victorious at Philippi. In the aftermath of the battle Antony and Octavian effectively divided control of the empire between them, with Antony taking as his primary sphere the East and Octavian the West.

There were scores to be settled in that summer of 41 B.C. Those Roman clients who had aided the Liberators must be punished; those who had resisted would be rewarded. But what of those who had sat on the fence? Just how they would fare would be up to one-sided negotiations with the new master of the Roman East. And so Mark Antony, stationing himself at Tar-

sus (in Cilicia on the southeastern Mediterranean coast of Anatolia), summoned the queen of Egypt to answer charges that she had secretly aided the cause of the Liberators.

Thus was set the stage for one of the most famous meetings in history: Cleopatra arrived at Tarsus on a sumptuous barge, invited Antony to dinner, and quickly persuaded him that (whatever she had done or had not done during the war between the triumvirs and the Liberators), he would be much better off with her as an active ally than as a deposed client-ruler. Presumably Antony and Cleopatra became lovers at that time; certainly Antony spent the winter in Alexandria, as the queen's guest. But as in the case of Caesar and Cleopatra, the sexual attraction was only one aspect of a larger political game, a game that would determine the course not just of individual careers, but of the Western world.

Antony needed the active support of the wealthy ruler of Egypt to defend and pursue his own and Rome's interests on two fronts. In the East, Antony was concerned with the expansionist tendencies of the Parthians, a bellicose semi-Hellenized people whose loose-knit kingdom stretched from Mesopotamia and the mountainous highlands of Persia eastward into central Asia. The Parthians had taken advantage of the disruptions of the Roman civil wars to push into Roman-occupied Syria, and their incursion potentially threatened the security of the entire eastern empire. The Parthians were a military force to be reckoned with: in 52 B.C. at Mesopotamian Carrhae they had handed Julius Caesar's triumviral colleague, Marcus Crassus, one of the worst and most humiliating defeats of recent Roman military history. Parthian mounted archers had chopped Crassus's infantry to shreds in the open plains of Mesopotamia. The legionary standards, the sacred "Eagles," that were lost at Carrhae had never yet been recovered. There was no doubt that a major campaign against the Parthians must be a central feature of Antony's Eastern sojourn; and no question but that it would be a difficult and expensive campaign. But events in Italy soon complicated the immediate goals (raise money [especially from Egypt], gather and train troops, shore up tottering client states, plan an invasion route that would avoid the open plains, and force the Parthians to come to terms). While Antony had been occupied in the East, some of his

relatives had taken it upon themselves to raise an army and attack forces loyal to Octavian. Worse yet, they made a mess of it; the “Antonine” forces were besieged and compelled to surrender in midwinter of 40 B.C.

Antony was thus pulled in two directions: He was eager to begin operations against the Parthians, but if he did not want an open break with Octavian (a break that could only lead to more civil war, and so to more inroads on Roman-held territory by the Parthians), he must go to Italy and take the lay of the land. When he got there he found a complicated situation; along with everything else, one of the sons of Pompey the Great, Sextus Pompey, had raised a navy and was emerging as an independent military factor, potentially threatening Italy’s vital lines of supply. Sextus knew that there had been trouble between the triumvirs and offered Antony an alliance against Octavian. But Sextus was an unsavory character with no reputation for sticking by his agreements. Antony stuck by Octavian, sealing their renewed alliance by marrying his partner’s sister, Octavia. The *de facto* division of the empire was renewed as well, with Octavian inheriting the responsibility for looking after matters in Italy, and Antony taking on full responsibility for the Parthian threat. While still in Rome, Antony proved his loyalty by intervening when Octavian was threatened by a mob furious over elevated taxes. Meanwhile, Antony’s loyal lieutenant, Ventidius, was pushing the Parthians out of Syria. Antony could return East with a sense of being on top of things; accompanied by his new wife he took up residence in Athens and began preparations for the great Parthian campaign. It appeared, for a while, as if the Second Triumvirate might prove durable.

That appearance was deceptive. Octavian’s ambition was not limited to the western empire, but he needed to rack up some dramatic military victories if he were to prove himself Antony’s equal in the eyes of the Romans—and especially of the legionaries. Octavian did not have a brilliant military mind; his greatest skills were in the area of politics and shaping public opinion. But he also proved highly adept at attracting talented and loyal people to his side. Among his most important “human resource assets” was Marcus Agrippa, a member of an obscure Roman family who proved to be outstanding at organizing and conducting large-scale naval operations.

Octavian set his sights on Sextus Pompey; crushing the last independent naval operation in the Mediterranean, and thereby assuring his own capacity to control the vital grain supply to the city of Rome, would be a public relations coup. But it would take some doing, not least because Antony was opposed to making war on Sextus, with whom the triumvirs had signed a pact. Ignoring his partner’s requests that he desist military operations, Octavian launched an ambitious campaign against Sextus. He immediately ran into difficulties, losing many of his ships to the sudden and violent storms that plague Mediterranean shipping. Despite his irritation, Antony refused to take advantage of Octavian’s weak position; instead of backstabbing, he came to Italy and offered his brother-in-law substantial material support. Yet Octavian proudly refused; Octavian knew that he would never cement a reputation as a victorious general if he remained in Antony’s shadow. And so the campaign against Sextus continued with ever-higher taxes raised from an increasingly disgruntled Roman population. Antony began to perceive the shape of things to come: The triumvirate would survive only until Octavian felt ready to make his bid for the entire empire.

In 37 B.C., Antony finally turned his full attention to the Parthian campaign, an operation that had been delayed due to his abortive attempt to help out Octavian at the nadir of the campaign against Sextus. Despite their agreement to share Italy as a neutral military recruiting ground, Octavian clearly intended to block any attempt his erstwhile partner might make to raise funds or men in Italy. If he were to take on the Parthians, Antony needed to raise massive funding in order to recruit and train a really big army. And this meant a return to Egypt and Cleopatra.

The queen was ready to negotiate and a deal was struck: She would pay for his legions; Antony in turn granted Cleopatra control of certain client-territories under Roman control and he recognized as legitimate his twin children by Cleopatra: Alexander Helios (“the Sun”) and Cleopatra Selene (“the Moon”). Cleopatra was by now in an even stronger position than she had been after the birth of Caesarion (now a boy of ten, and still very much in the succession picture): she was the consort of and the mother of the children of the most important Roman in the East. Cleopatra had played her key cards—Egypt’s wealth and her own reproductive capacity—with

great skill. If Antony fulfilled his promise as a general, the future of independent Egypt—and the future of its new/old line of Romano-Macedonian rulers—looked very rosy indeed.

The year 36 B.C. would prove decisive: Octavian's renewed campaign against Sextus Pompey and Antony's grand invasion of Parthian Mesopotamia unrolled in parallel dimensions, the one on sea and the other over land. But, contrary to all expectations, whereas Octavian's campaign went like clockwork (thanks to the careful advance planning of Agrippa), Antony's campaign against the Parthians proved to be an unmitigated disaster. The route of invasion, through Armenia and down the headwaters of the Tigris to the heart of Parthian territory, was well thought through—carefully avoiding the open desert terrain that had doomed Crassus at Carrhae. But the departure of the expedition from its Armenian base was unaccountably delayed, forcing Antony to push his infantry ahead of his siege-train in the march south. His ill-defended siege-train was captured by the highly mobile Parthian cavalry. And deprived of his siege engines, Antony failed to capture the key stronghold of Phraaspa, where he probably intended to winter his troops. The client-king of Armenia suddenly withdrew his vital cavalry units. The king of the Parthians refused to be bluffed into turning over the lost Roman standards. In the course of an inglorious Roman retreat north, the “finest army that any commander of that epoch gathered together” (Plutarch) was routed by the Parthians. Antony had lost some two-fifths of his force, perhaps 32,000 men total, mostly to hunger, weather, and disease.

Octavian's glorious naval victory and Antony's disastrous overland failure laid the groundwork for the decisive encounter at Actium five years later.

Antony's options narrowed considerably after his expedition into Parthia. The loss of men, material, and especially prestige in the eyes of his fellow Romans represented very serious setbacks. Before the Parthian disaster, Antony had been able to play a variety of roles simultaneously; now he would have to make some choices. It was no longer possible for him to act at once as Octavian's cooperative partner in the management of the Roman Empire, Octavian's sometime rival for supremacy in the Roman state,

and a freelance potentate in the Hellenistic East. At least one of those roles would have to be dropped, and another would have to be prioritized. Antony's subsequent actions elucidate his decision: the facade of cooperative partnership was dropped and the role of Hellenistic dynast became primary. The rivalry with Octavian would continue, but now it would be carried out in terms of the forces of the East, led by Antony and financed by Cleopatra, versus the forces of the West, led by Octavian and financed by Roman taxpayers. Antony's decision was finalized by his refusal to accept fresh troops and supplies offered by his wife, Octavia: the troops were too few, the supplies too parsimonious in comparison with those he could expect from Egypt.

Acting very much as a Hellenistic dynast, Antony moved quickly to shore up his alliances with the lesser dynasts of Asia, especially the king of Media, who might prove an effective counterweight to the expansionist Parthians. He also moved decisively against the treasonous king of Armenia, defeating the Armenian forces in battle and capturing the king himself, who was taken back to Egypt in silver chains. In the aftermath of that victory, Antony held a grand celebration in Alexandria. It had overtones of the official Roman general's Triumph—a sacred victory parade that could only be celebrated in Rome. Moreover, again acting in his role as Hellenistic dynast, he formally granted control over various Asian territories to his young children by Cleopatra. Caesarion was declared joint ruler with his mother over Egypt.

In Italy, Octavian, master of spin, saw that Antony was playing into his hand. The grants of Asian territory, the notorious “Donations of Alexandria,” could be sold to the Roman audience as proof positive that Antony had “gone Eastern” and had renounced his primary loyalty to “the Senate and People of Rome.” Antony still had many partisans in Rome who clung to the memory of Antony as Caesar's loyal comrade. But Octavian's verbal attacks cleverly shifted attention from Antony to Cleopatra herself. Antony was not to be depicted as a monster, but as the drink-and-love besotted dupe of a diabolically clever and limitlessly ambitious Eastern witch. Octavian concocted a story to the effect that Cleopatra hoped to rule over the entire Roman Empire, establishing her sway over the city of Rome it-

self. And thus, loyalty to Antony could be recast as treason against Rome. Realizing the growing danger, the pro-Antony senators fled East. With their departure, Octavian enjoyed undisputed control of Rome. Among his first actions was to seize Antony's will from the Vestal Virgins, the sacrosanct priestesses in whose care Antony had left his testament. Portions were read out to the rump-Senate of Octavian supporters: among its scandalous provisions was Antony's request to be buried in Egypt, next to his queen. Proof positive, screamed the propaganda machine, that Cleopatra had seduced Antony into renouncing his Roman heritage.

By 32 B.C., there was no further doubt that the Roman civil wars had entered their next "hot" phase and both sides gathered their forces. With Cleopatra's financial backing, Antony was able to raise an impressive force: some nineteen legions—about 75,000 men, including veterans of the campaigns of Philippi and Parthia; 25,000 auxiliary infantry (non-Roman troops raised from around the Eastern empire); 12,000 cavalry; 500 heavy oared warships; and 300 merchant ships to carry supplies. Antony could not use this mighty force to invade Italy: that would play all too readily into Octavian's story about "Cleopatra the would-be Queen of the World." But it must have been with serious misgivings that Antony took up a defensive position at Actium and awaited Octavian's attack: The "defensive position in Greece" strategy made sense in terms of forcing his opponent to stretch supply lines across the Adriatic, but it had recently proved fatal to the hopes of Pompey the Great and the Liberators.

Fatal as well, as it turned out, for Antony. Octavian's campaign of disinformation mounted a crescendo: the war was a patriotic crusade. Not, of course, against his old friend Antony, but against the terrifying seductress Cleopatra. "All Italy," Octavian later boasted, "of its own volition, swore an oath of loyalty to me." Exaggeration to be sure, but indicative of the tenor of Octavian's public relations effort, an effort that eventually proved corrosive to the loyalty of many of Antony's fighting men and his key senatorial supporters. Antony's problem with maintaining morale in the face of Octavian's hostile propaganda was compounded by Cleopatra's presence in his own camp. As Antony's paymaster and most important ally, she meant to keep a close eye on operations. And we may suppose that her decision to

put herself in the center of the action was sealed by the shadow of the period after the death of Julius Caesar, when she had had no choice but to sit on the fence, nervously awaiting the outcome of military events over which she had no control. But the Romans in Antony's camp understood none of this. They increasingly found it hard to deny that there might be some truth in Octavian's charges: Maybe that woman did have some unnatural hold over their commander. And if so, who were they really fighting for after all? For his part, Antony was finding that his role as Hellenistic dynast made it extremely difficult to work with traditional Romans—men who were used to giving commands to oriental potentates, not taking commands from them.

Meanwhile, on Octavian's side, Agrippa was displaying his usual efficiency as an admiral. The fleet headed out from Brundisium, via Corcyra, to establish a primary base at the future site of Nicopolis; Antony's main camp was due south, just across a narrow strait, on the Actium peninsula. By quickly establishing a secondary naval base in a harbor south of Actium, Agrippa bottled up the better part of Antony's warships in the Ambracian Gulf. Meanwhile, Antony's own attempts to force a land battle by using his cavalry to cut off Octavian's camp from its water supply fell short. The campaign was stalemated: Antony dared not offer battle by sea, nor Octavian by land. But defections and disease were decimating Antony's forces; time was clearly on Octavian's side.

By September 2, 31 B.C., Antony was desperate. His only hope of extricating himself from the increasingly dire situation was by risking open battle at sea with his 230 remaining ships. The resulting battle was hard fought, but Octavian had many more ships and the numbers told against Antony's forces. In the afternoon, as the wind came, a squadron of some eighty ships led by Cleopatra's flagship broke through the screen of enemy warships, raised sails, and made a dash south for Egypt. With Antony following, they made good their escape. Octavian's partisans would later say that Cleopatra's flight from the battle was precipitous; but it is more likely that the breakout was carefully planned. Cleopatra's ships, like Antony's, had deliberately carried sails into battle; normally ancient oared ships entered battles stripped of their heavy sails.

Despite Antony's escape, Octavian had won the battle, and decisively. Antony's land army broke camp and withdrew in good order through Macedonia. Octavian the politician knew enough not to press the issue. Rather than challenging Antony's intact land force to battle, he opened negotiations with them; Antony's defeated forces would be bought off. Octavian could afford it. With the whole of the wealthy Eastern empire about to fall to his hands, he had no further reason to worry about money. And fall it quickly did. Antony made no serious attempt to defend Egypt against the invasion that soon followed. He committed suicide by sword. Cleopatra, now Octavian's captive, followed her lover's example by deploying the famous asp. Egypt with all its material and cultural riches became Octavian's personal possession. The eastern and western ends of the Roman Empire were now reunited under the authority of a single man. Octavian was eventually given the name "Augustus Caesar" by his grateful subjects, and the age of the emperors began.

But none of this might have come to pass if the events had proceeded somewhat differently in the year 36 B.C.

Antony's failure at Actium had nothing to do with the size of Cleopatra's nose, and everything to do with the military disaster he suffered in Parthia in 36. It was the loss of men, arms, and prestige that precipitated his fatal decision to embrace the role of Hellenistic dynast, and thus to take on Cleopatra as an ally of equal standing—rather than treating Egypt as a client kingdom, which would enjoy a tenuous independence only for so long as it pleased Rome. That decision cannot have been made lightly—Antony knew enough Roman history to grasp just how hard it would be for an Eastern potentate (even one born Roman) to challenge the sway exercised by the city on the Tiber.

But what if Antony had been more successful in Parthia? There is every reason to suppose he could have been: He was a fine general, his large army was in excellent condition, and his basic strategy (securing Armenia, invading via the Tigris headwaters) was subsequently used successfully by Roman imperial generals. The Parthians would come to terms if pressed; they later turned over the lost standards in a negotiated settlement to one

of Octavian's generals—a diplomatic coup that Octavian never tired of trumpeting.

Antony's key error in 36 seems to have been in the timing of the expedition's launch. We will never be able to penetrate the fog of Octavian's propaganda sufficiently to explain why in fact the expedition left Armenia so late in the campaigning season. But let us suppose that Antony had been just a bit more prescient in 38 B.C., and saw then that it would be a waste of time to seek to deflect Octavian from striking at Sextus Pompey. Let's suppose that he saw that it would be a further waste of time to seek to aid Octavian after the disastrous first naval campaign against Sextus. Let us suppose, then, that in 38 and 37 Antony stayed sharply focused on his own impending campaign against the Parthians, putting all of his considerable talents and energies into launching his forces as early as possible in the campaigning season of 36. If the departure had been on time, he would not have been constrained to leave his siege-train defenseless during the southern march. The stronghold of Phraaspa would have fallen to superior Roman siege craft before winter. And thus, there would have been every reason for the pragmatic Parthians to negotiate a deal similar to the one they in fact eventually negotiated with Octavian.

A victory in Parthia in 36 would have dramatically expanded Antony's subsequent options. The return of the standards lost by Crassus would have wiped away the shame of one of the greatest losses ever suffered by Rome's legions. Octavian could not possibly have denied his partner the right to celebrate a grand Triumph in Rome. The prestige of defeating the barbarous Parthians would have more than counterbalanced Agrippa's civil-war successes against Sextus Pompey in the eyes of the Roman people. Antony would have no difficulties recruiting men wherever he pleased. There would have been no realistic possibility of keeping him out of Rome—if, indeed, he wanted to spend time extending his influence in the city. But by the same token, there is no necessary reason to suppose that he would have chosen to spend the rest of his career in Italy.

"Marcus Antonius Parthicus—Mark Antony, Victor over the Parthians" might well have chosen to spend most of his time in the East. There can be

little doubt that Antony genuinely enjoyed his life in Alexandria, including the company of Cleopatra. She was in every sense his intellectual peer, and had lived an exciting life in which her successes and failures were direct products of her own decisions. She had a bright sense of humor and was overall splendid company for a man with Antony's background and tastes. In brief, she was a good deal more interesting than most of the Roman women Antony would have known. And Alexandria was a genuinely fascinating, highly cultured city. Defeating the Parthians would have allowed Antony to enjoy Alexandria and Cleopatra's company on his own terms. Whatever their assumed level of equality when in private, he could have maintained a "properly" Roman political distance from the queen of Egypt in public. There would have been no need for the politically embarrassing spectacle of the "Donations of Alexandria"—at least not until Octavian had been dealt with once and for all.

Octavian would indeed need to be dealt with: Julius Caesar's adopted son was simply too ambitious, too power hungry to have allowed Antony to remain at a level of genuine parity. Eventually, and probably sooner than later, there would have been a break between them: the Battle of Actium (or some simulacrum thereof) was bound to be fought. Because Antony lost to the Parthians, events in the five years after 36 B.C. went almost entirely in Octavian's favor, and they fed his increasingly strident campaign of propaganda and disinformation. But that campaign of words and images would have had much less to work with had Antony been successful in Parthia. Rather than the sad dupe of Cleopatra, Octavian would be taking on the man who was unquestionably the premier general of his age. Even with the aid of Agrippa, master of naval operations, Octavian would be hard-pressed to come up with a winning strategy against such a figure and the high-morale army he would command. Even as it actually took place, the Actium campaign was not an easy victory for Octavian. Going up against an army and a general that did not suffer from the "Cleopatra factor" would have been a far greater risk.

Had Antony defeated Octavian's forces at Actium—most likely by forcing a land battle—he would need to return to Italy for at least a while. Like

Sulla in 86 B.C., Antony would need to mop up pro-Octavian forces. And he would need to arrange political matters in Rome to his own liking.

What might his arrangement have entailed? There is not much reason to suppose that Antony shared Octavian's monarchical vision for the Roman Empire—it is more likely that Antony would have purged the Senate of Octavian's partisans and packed it with his own. But then he might have left the aristocracy to rule (within the bounds set by the military strongman of the hour), as it had throughout the period of the Republic. Antony might have divided his time between Rome and Alexandria, between working to ensure the continuity of a stable "Antonine" aristocracy in Rome and establishing Egypt and its queen at the center of a stable group of quasi-independent client states in the East. On this model, Egypt would not have become a Roman province, nor would (for example) Judea. Cleopatra (and her heirs) would dominate the southeastern Mediterranean culturally and economically, careful never to act in any way that might appear to threaten Rome's supremacy. Antony had realized (and would teach his own political heirs) that active rulership of this very tricky part of the world—with its mosaic of religious commitments and cultural traditions—was best left to the Macedonian descendents of Ptolemy I, who had spent generations developing techniques for maximizing revenues while minimizing cultural conflicts.

The long-term historical effects of such an arrangement in the eastern Empire, especially if we imagine the politically astute, multilingual, culturally sophisticated Cleopatra as its behind-the-scenes architect, would have been profound. Mediterranean culture and commerce would have revolved around two great poles—Alexandria and Rome. Interchange between the two would have been constant and intense: Roman exposure to Greek culture would be primarily mediated through the multicultural filter of Egypt's capital city.

Egyptian-speaking Cleopatra would see that the weak point in Ptolemaic social policy had been the segregation of Egyptian and Greek cultures. In her own person she was a cultural fusionist, and with the Roman military to restrain open expressions of resentment on the part of any of her Greek

subjects who felt that equity for Egyptians threatened their own privileges, Cleopatra would have been able to make significant inroads in the traditional exclusion of ethnic Egyptians from active participation in the life of the city.

Among the most striking social developments, especially from the perspective of traditional Romans, would be the relatively greater freedom enjoyed by women in Egypt. Under Ptolemaic rule, native Egyptian women, mostly living outside of Alexandria, had retained their traditional rights: they could go into law, inherit real estate, and operate businesses in their own name. Now that pattern of relatively greater gender equality could spread into the capital city. Among the Alexandrian elite, Cleopatra's own example would have provided the model for an expansion of educational, cultural, perhaps even political opportunities for women. An openly multicultural society in which women took on some of the roles traditional Romans had always supposed were uniquely the preserve of men, would have been highly attractive to certain Greeks and Romans—Antony's tastes in culture and society were hardly unique. Egypt would continue to benefit from the talents of immigrants eager to find a place in the relatively open culture that contrasted so starkly with most of the societies that had so far flourished around the Mediterranean basin. The culture that would have emerged within a few generations after Actium might indeed begin to look remarkably "modern" to the eyes of twenty-first-century readers.

Meanwhile, the "Egyptian zone" of the southeastern Mediterranean would remain a center of religious innovation—and a hotbed of imaginative interfaces between religion and state. The early Ptolemies had proved themselves to be open-minded and inventive in the religious sphere, creating a composite state religion based on the god Serapis, which had blended Greek and Egyptian elements. Cleopatra had strongly encouraged identification of herself with the highly popular Egyptian goddess Isis, but she was happy to mix the rituals associated with a variety of deities into the frequent religious celebrations in which she and Antony participated.

If Antony had won at Actium, Jesus of Nazareth, born just a short generation after the battle, would have come to manhood in a very different society—one administered by highly trained professional Ptolemaic bu-

reaucrats, rather than nervous Roman amateurs like Pontius Pilate. Those Ptolemaic bureaucrats would have had a much closer sense of how Jerusalem politics worked: they might well have found some solution to local concerns about a self-proclaimed messiah that would not have required his crucifixion. They might, for example, have arranged for him to move to Alexandria, where the sophisticated, hellenized local Jewish population would not be scandalized by his audacious ideas. So Jesus might have grown old, gathering to himself a following attracted by his socioreligious message rather than by a dramatic martyrdom. If so, Christianity would have developed quite differently and Alexandria, not Rome, would be its center.

If the new religion found quick and wide acceptance within the realm, the flexible heirs of Cleopatra would have found a place for it in the festival life of the city, perhaps eventually putting Serapis on the back burner and (like the Roman emperor Constantine in the fourth century A.D.) promoting Christianity as the favored state religion. Let us suppose, for a moment, that Caesarion, son of Julius Caesar, had succeeded his mother on the throne, and (keeping it all in the family, as the Ptolemies were prone to do) had married Cleopatra VIII Selene, daughter of Antony and Cleopatra. They in turn might have had a daughter, who would surely (following highly conservative Ptolemaic naming practice) also be named Cleopatra. This hypothetical Cleopatra IX might have come to the throne at the time that Christianity was officially incorporated into the Egyptian state religion, a religion in which the queen of Egypt must of course be a central figure. And so we might imagine that a woman with a remarkable ancestry, granddaughter of Julius Caesar, of Mark Antony, and (twice over) of Cleopatra VII, would become Founding High Priestess—"Lady Pope" of the Universal Alexandrian Church of Jesus the Uncrucified.

In any event, the world we live in would be very different, and perhaps not worse, if the stone-wall monument above Nicopolis had displayed pieces of the warships of Octavian rather than of those lost by Mark Antony at the battle of Actium.

## **Not by a Nose**

- 1. How plausible were the events that followed these different events?**
- 2. Which seem the most likely? And which the least likely?**
- 3. How would the Western traditions differ from the way they now exist?**
- 4. Which outcome would you have preferred and why?**
- 5. How great an influence do you think romantic relationships can have on historical outcomes: Napoleon and Josephine, Bill and Hilary Clinton, John Adams and Abigail etc.?**

**Nicholas A. DiChario**

*A prolific writer of short fiction, Nicholas A. DiChario has published more than two dozen stories in the past decade. His short fiction, some of it written in collaboration with Mike Resnick, has appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Starshore, and Science Fiction Age, and been anthologized in The Ultimate Alien, Universe Three, Witch Fantastic, Christmas Ghosts, and numerous other anthologies. DiChario's special interest in alternate history is on display in his contributions to Alternate Tyrants, Alternate Warriors, and The Way It Wasn't. "The Winterberry," which appeared in the anthology Alternate Kennedys, was selected for inclusion in the Writers of the Future series.*

## THE WINTERBERRY

**Nicholas A. DiChario**

MAY, 1971

IT WAS UNCLE TEDDY who taught me how to read and write. I think it took a long time but I'm not sure. I heard him arguing with Mother about it one night a few years ago when I wasn't supposed to be out of my room, but I was very excited with the next day being my birthday and I couldn't sleep.

"He can do it," Uncle Teddy had said.

And Mother said, "He doesn't care whether he reads or writes. It's you who cares. Why do you torture yourself? Let him be."

"He's fifty-four years old," Uncle Teddy said.

"Let him be!" Mother sounded very angry.

I listened to Uncle Teddy walk across the room. "If you feel that way," he said, "why didn't you just let him die?"

There was a long silence before Mother said, "I don't know," and another long silence after that.

Something in their voices frightened me so I returned to my room. I became very ill, and for several weeks Dr. Armbruster came to see me every day but he wouldn't let anyone else come in because he said I was too weak to have visitors.

But sometime after, when I was much better, Uncle Teddy came to visit and he brought a picture book with him which made me remember his talk with Mother. I'm glad Uncle Teddy got his way because now I read and write a lot even though I throw most of my writing away. I hide some of it though and keep it just for myself, and it's

not because I'm being sneaky, it's more because some of the things I write are my own personal secrets and I don't want to tell anyone, just like people don't want to tell me things sometimes when I ask them questions.

### DECEMBER, 1977

I am very excited about Christmas almost being here. I am looking forward to Uncle Teddy's stay because he always has something fun in mind. Yesterday after he arrived he walked me through the house and showed me all of the decorations—wreaths and flowers and a huge Christmas tree near the front hall, strung with tinsel and candles. He brought with him several boxes full of gifts, all shapes and sizes, wrapped in bright colors—red and green and blue and silver with bows and ribbons—and I knew they were all for me because he put them under my tree upstairs.

Our house is very large. Mother calls it a mansion. She doesn't allow me to go anywhere except the room on my floor. She says I have everything I need right here.

That's why sometimes at night I'll walk around when everything is dark and everyone is asleep or in their rooms for the night. I don't think I'm being sneaky, it's just that I am very curious and if I ask about things no one tells me what I want to know. I've come to know this house very well. There are many hidden passageways behind the walls and I know them all by heart. I will hear things every once in a while that mother would not like me to hear.

There was a big happening in the house last night and the servants were very busy, although it did not look to be a planned thing because everyone appeared disorganized and Mother didn't come to lock me in my room.

I went through one of my passageways that led to the main entrance of the house and I peeked through a tiny opening in the wall and saw a very beautiful woman with dark hair standing inside the door. She was so beautiful that I held my breath. It must have been very cold outside because she was wearing a long black winter coat and there were flakes of snow on her hair. When she spoke, it was the most soft and delicate voice I had ever heard. She said, "Merry Christmas."

I wanted to stay and watch the woman forever but I knew that Mother would be up to check on me so I ran back to my room and pretended to be asleep. Mother came in and kissed my head and said,

"Sleep well, child," like she did every night. I listened very closely for a long time hoping to hear the voice of the woman again, but next thing I knew it was morning, and she was gone.

### OCTOBER, 1982

I heard Mother and Dr. Armbruster arguing yesterday. They were just talking pleasantly for a while and I was listening in my passageway to the low, pleasant sound of their voices. The doctor was saying things I did not understand about sickness and diets and so on, when all of a sudden he said, "But John is doing fine," and Mother just about exploded with anger.

"His name is not John, do you understand me? Don't you ever call him by that name again! John is dead! My John is dead!" I had never heard Mother get so angry except for that one time with Uncle Teddy. She made the doctor leave right away and told him he could be replaced, but I hoped that she wouldn't do that because I sort of liked Dr. Armbruster.

I don't know who John is, but I felt very bad for Mother. I had never really thought about my own name before. Uncle Teddy and everyone calls me Sonny because it's short for Sonny Boy, and that's good enough for me. But it made me wonder how someone could get a name like John. Uncle Teddy was probably named after a teddy bear. Mother was just Mother.

### MAY, 1987

Today was a very special day. It was my seventieth birthday. Uncle Teddy came to visit and I was very excited because I hadn't seen him in such a long time. We had a big cake and a lot of food and we played checkers for an hour. Then Uncle Teddy took me outside for a walk!

I'll never forget it as long as I live. I think Mother was not happy about it because she did not want to let me go at first, but Uncle Teddy talked her into it and we went outside surrounded by men in black suits and ties and shoes. Uncle Teddy asked me if I minded if his friends went with us, and of course I didn't care. They came to my party and they had a right to have fun. In fact, I told them that if they smiled more they might have a nicer time all around, but Uncle Teddy said they were usually very serious people and were happy that way.

It was a sunny day. The wind blew in my face and stung my eyes at

first, but it felt good. Uncle Teddy took me all around the yard and into the garden where I smelled the roses and touched the bushes and the vines. I listened to the birds calling and the insects buzzing. I never dreamed they would sound so loud and so near.

I touched the winterberry hollies which were very special to me because I could always see their bright red berries from my window, even during the cold cold winters.

After a short time I caught a chill and had to go inside, and I was weak for the rest of the day. But I didn't care—I had such fun! I'll always remember it.

#### AUGUST, 1996

One night I entered a storage room through my passageway where there were a lot of tools and brooms and rags and buckets and things. I rummaged around in the dark and my hands found a flashlight. I thought this would be a wonderful thing to have so I took it with me hoping that no one would miss it. Now I can sit in bed at night and read and write as long as I like and not have to worry about someone seeing my light.

I have not seen Mother in a very long time. I wondered if she was angry with me even though I didn't think she knew about my passageways or my late-night writing. Mother would have yelled at me if she knew.

I've been seeing more and more of Uncle Teddy, so I asked him about Mother today and he said that she went away on a very long trip and I wouldn't be seeing her for a while.

I asked him how long that might be and he said not long, he said soon we'd all be seeing her and then maybe we'd find out whether we did the right thing, whether the choices we'd made over the years had been the proper ones. He looked very sad when he said this, and then he said, "I think there is such a place, Sonny Boy, a place where we learn why everything is the way it is."

I asked him if Dr. Armbruster had gone with Mother since I hadn't seen him in so long and I was seeing Dr. Morelande almost every day now, and Uncle Teddy told me yes.

I thought about how lucky Mother was to visit this place, a place where every time you asked a question you got an answer, and I could not blame her if she didn't want to come back for a while. I told Uncle Teddy so, and he seemed to cheer up. We played cards for the rest of the afternoon.

#### MAY, 1997

Today was my eightieth birthday. I have been very sick and I was afraid that I might not be able to have my party, but Dr. Morelande said it was OK so we had cake and games with Uncle Teddy and I had a very nice time even though I had to stay in bed.

It was after my party that I had a scare. I was very weak, and I probably should have just gone to sleep, but being so excited all day and not being allowed to get up, I turned restless after dark, so I decided to take a short walk through my passageways.

I followed a path that led to the back of a closet in Uncle Teddy's room, and I saw some light coming through the darkness so I went up to it. That's all I was going to do—peek and go away—until I saw Uncle Teddy crying. I'd never seen Uncle Teddy cry before. He was in bed. He had a large, green book on his lap, and every so often he would turn a page and cry some more.

I watched him for a while, waiting for him to be all right, but he didn't stop crying and I couldn't stand to watch him any longer, so I did a foolish thing and I entered his room through the closet.

"Sonny Boy," he said, "what are you doing here?"

I thought he might be angry with me so I wanted to say that I saw him crying, and that I only wanted to help him and be a friend, but before I could say anything he said, "So you know about the passages," and he didn't seem to be upset at all.

"Come over here, Sonny," he said.

I went and sat on the edge of his bed. He was looking at a photo album. Mother had shown me some photo albums years ago, and I thought they were interesting and we had a lot of fun even though I didn't recognize any of the faces. I don't ever remember crying over them. But Uncle Teddy's album was different. There were newspaper pictures, and headlines, and articles.

Uncle Teddy was looking at a picture of a man and a woman. The man seemed very serious-looking, and his right hand was raised like an Indian chief's, but he had on a suit and tie and no headdress. The man's eyes were closed.

The woman had short black hair with long bangs, and she was looking down.

And then all of a sudden I just about screamed. I knew that woman. I remembered her from . . . from somewhere.

Uncle Teddy said, "You know her, don't you? Think, Sonny Boy, think very hard. What do you remember?"

I did think very hard, and then I remembered where I had seen her. She was the beautiful black-haired woman I had seen at Christmastime in the main entrance of the house years ago.

But then there was more. As I looked at the woman in the picture something very strange came into my head. I had a passing thought of this same woman in a pretty white gown, with a white veil over her face. It was just a piece of a thought that I could not keep in my mind for very long, but I'll never forget it. I reached out and touched the picture.

"Always grand," Uncle Teddy said. "She was wearing a very dignified, raspberry-colored suit that day."

But that's not what I had seen. I had seen the white gown. I had seen something that happened before my room and my house and my passageways and Mother and Uncle Teddy. Was there anything before them? Yes, I think there was. It was more than a passing thought—it was a *memory*.

"Was I married, Uncle Teddy?" I asked him.

He smiled. "Yes, you were. You proposed to her by telegram, you know, from Paris."

I thought this was interesting, but nothing more than that. Uncle Teddy started to cry again.

"Please, don't cry," I said.

He held my hand then. "I'm sorry we couldn't tell her you were alive. We couldn't tell your children, not anyone, not even Father because we couldn't be sure of his reaction. Mother was adamant about that. No one could know. Just Bobby and Mother and myself—and the doctors, of course. Now there's just me.

"It was for the good of the country. Those were critical times. The eyes of the world were watching us. We could not afford hesitancy. We felt you would have wanted it that way. Do you understand?"

I didn't, but I nodded anyway to stop Uncle Teddy from crying. He was clutching my arm very hard.

He traced the newspaper picture with his finger. "She was a strong woman, Sonny Boy. You would have been proud of her. I remember her standing right next to Lyndon, solid as a rock, little more than an hour after you were pronounced dead."

I was very confused about Uncle Teddy calling me dead, and about what the woman in the picture had to do with any of it, so I closed the book and placed it on the floor. I remembered what Mother used to do to make me feel better, so I thought that maybe the same thing might help Uncle Teddy feel better too.

I pulled his bed covers up to his chin, brushed back his hair, kissed him on the forehead, and turned out his light. "Sleep well, child," I said, and then I went back to my room. I was sure Uncle Teddy would be just fine in the morning. It had always worked for me.

## DECEMBER, 2008

Dr. Morelande is the only one who comes to see me anymore. He says that Uncle Teddy is so busy he can't find time to stop by. But I don't think that's exactly true. I think Uncle Teddy went on vacation with Mother and Dr. Armbruster, and he is having so much fun that he is not coming back at all.

Dr. Morelande has tried very hard to make this a good Christmas, but I am sorry to say I am not very happy. I am tired all of the time, and I can't even move out of bed. Dr. Morelande asked me if I wanted anything for Christmas, but if I couldn't have Mother or Uncle Teddy, then there was nothing to ask for.

But then I thought about it and thought about it for a long time, and I remembered the pictures Uncle Teddy had shown me many years ago. I told Dr. Morelande about the green photo album in Uncle Teddy's room and asked him if he could find it for me. A little while later Dr. Morelande returned with the book.

Together we went through the pictures, and when we got to the one Uncle Teddy had shown me, the one with the man and the beautiful dark-haired woman, I made him stop.

"There *is* something I want for Christmas," I told him. "There is something I want very much."

I decided to tell Dr. Morelande about the passageways then. I didn't think that I would get in trouble. I made him put me in my wheelchair and take me for a walk behind the walls. He argued with me at first, but I refused to be put off.

I told him exactly which path to follow. He wheeled me all the way down to the wall at the main entrance. I looked through the small opening. I was sure that the beautiful dark-haired woman would be standing at the door in her winter coat. I was disappointed that she wasn't there. I thought that if I waited long enough she would certainly show up—she would come back like the winterberry, bright and strong even in the cold cold winter. There would be snowflakes in her hair, and she would say "Merry Christmas" in her lovely voice. So we waited.

Finally Dr. Morelande said that if I agreed to go to bed, he would

wait for the woman, and bring her directly to me as soon as she arrived. I thought that this would be a good idea since I was so tired.

When she arrives, we will have many things to discuss. I have decided to make her my new friend. I think I will show her my book of writings. I think I will ask her about the white gown to show her that I have not forgotten, and then I'll ask her about the children Uncle Teddy mentioned. I won't tell her about the vacation place where everyone has gone without me, and not because I'm being sneaky, but only because I am very lonely and I would like her to stay with me for a while.

## **Winterberry**

- 1. Who is Ted?**
- 2. Why was it that the secret was kept?**
- 3. Which seemed the most likely? And which the least likely?**
- 4. What emotions did the author try to elicit in the narrative?**
- 5. How effective was the author's writing style to tell his tale?**