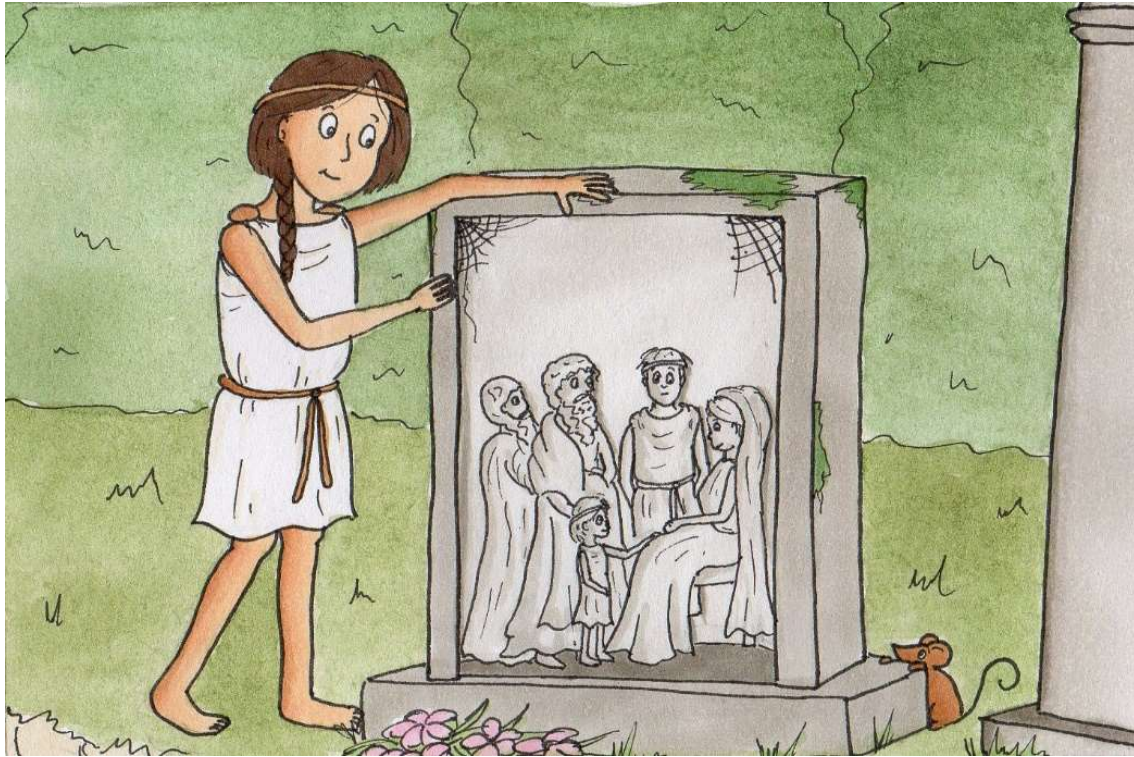


CHAPTER 4

TALKING TO YOURSELF



Delphi pulled a few cobwebs off the monument and blinked at the figures carved in the marble.

There was her gran, sitting proudly on a chair, with Delphi's father standing behind her. There were other figures around them too, but Delphi was most interested in the little girl, who was standing awkwardly at her grandmother's feet, one hand reaching up to balance on the old woman's knee.

It was Delphi, aged two.

As was the custom, her father had created this monument when her grandmother had died and it now rested here, in a forgotten corner of the Kerameikos, off the track from where the rich families were buried. Most families couldn't afford sculpted monuments like this one, but of course, her father was a sculptor so it was the one and only benefit that went with the job. Delphi often wished he was a honey-cake baker instead.

Now it was one of the few responsibilities that fell on Delphi – to keep the graveside well-tended and clean. Her father said that her grandmother's soul now inhabited that sculpture, and as long as they looked after it, she would always be alive. But Delphi wasn't sure about this, and from the way her father had said it, she had a feeling her dad wasn't sure about this either. It was hard to believe the soul of your gran possessed an object – especially one you'd heard your dad chipping, sweating and swearing at for weeks.

Delphi looked down at that little girl. She had short hair and a loving grin. Delphi didn't think it looked like her and probably never had. It looked like somebody else.

"Who are you, really?" she asked, furrowing her eyebrows at the sculpture. "I don't remember you. It's only my dad that says that you're me and he's wrong about most things." The girl in the sculpture didn't answer her.

She turned away, frowning, and headed for home, thinking about the tiny, two-year-old Delphi. Were they really the same person?

**Are there any reasons
why they are not the
same person?**

Say it like this!
An-dron

Say it like this!
Giy-ne-see-um
(But it varies!)

Delphi's house was a typical one for Athens. It was built around a small central courtyard, with all the rooms coming off it. There was the andron, the main front room where her dad would entertain visitors, and where she wasn't supposed to go (but often did). There was the gynaeceum, the tiny women's quarters, where Delphi was supposed to go (but never did). She had her bedroom in a tiny room filled with boxes at the back. But her favourite part of the house was the courtyard itself, where the ivy grew up the stone and Zeno had his little pen. She sat there now, on a little wooden stool, watching her tortoise nibble a lettuce.

She had to spend a lot of time here. She was supposed to spend all her time here. But it got lonely by herself while her dad was in his workshop, and they didn't keep slaves anymore, and she wasn't allowed visitors and...



There was a shout from the front of the house. A woman's voice.

Delphi leapt up, wondering who it was. Sometimes a neighbour popped round to check on her, or it could be one of her friends, but it turned out to be someone she didn't know. She had brown hair wrapped up in a bun and was wearing a long white chiton dress with a blue cloak.



"There you are!" she said, as soon as Delphi approached. "I was beginning to think you'd snuck off to the Agora." The woman walked in as if she owned the place.

"Um... hello," Delphi said, and then her brain caught up with her ears. "I don't sneak into the..."

"Well, let's have a look at you then!" the woman declared and looked Delphi up and down. "Gods, you're so skinny! You need to do some more exercise, build your muscles up a bit."

Delphi opened her mouth a couple of times, before settling on: "Who are you?"

"I'm a guest!" the woman declared. "And that means you have to invite me in and offer me something to drink. And eat," she added.

Say it like this!
Zee-nee-uh

Delphi bit her lip, but she knew that the woman, whoever she was, was right. The Greek custom of *xenia* meant that turning away a guest at your home was unforgivable. Zeus got very stropky about that sort of thing.

"Um... OK," replied Delphi. "The women's quarters are..."

"Through here?" finished the woman, pushing past her. "Yes, I know, but let's sit in the courtyard, there'll be much more space."

"Have you been here before?" Delphi asked, scuttling behind her. The woman laughed.

"You might say that," she answered and grinned when Delphi pulled a face at her. "Anyway, I think we better get straight to it. The others will be here before long."

"The... the others?" asked Delphi.

"Yes. There might be quite a few, I think. I thought I'd come early and help you get the food ready. Come on." The woman went straight to their pantry and started picking out vegetables and bread, olives and fruits, and cheese and eggs and almost everything else.

"Hey, that's my food!" Delphi paused. "Well, it's my dad's food, but he was saving it for..."

"He won't mind," the woman said. "Hold this," and she thrust a jar of wine into Delphi's hands.

"Who are you?" Delphi asked again. "Do you know my dad? Are you his friend?" The woman paused, her hand wrapped around a loaf of bread.

"Not exactly," she replied, clearly thinking about it. "No time to explain, we've got a lot to do!" She pushed Delphi back to the courtyard. "I'll do the porridge and the salad, you can chop everything up!"



The next half an hour passed in a blur. The woman lit a fire and started bubbling up a traditional Greek porridge with barley, vegetables and cheese. She poured out the wine and mixed it with water and even sliced up a small squid and deboned a smoked fish. Delphi spent most of this time massacring the loaf of bread with a blunt knife, until it looked like a pile of rubble.

Delphi wasn't entirely sure why she was going along with this. She had protested a couple of times, especially when the woman had started chopping up Delphi's honey cake, but there was something about her that Delphi trusted, even if she wasn't entirely sure what it was. Soon, almost the entire contents of the larder were laid out on wooden plates, all cut up into bitesize chunks, next to a steaming tub of the cheesy, vegetable and fish porridge. A traditional Greek feast in fact.

"Who's coming? Does my dad know about this?" asked Delphi, for the third time.

"Quick, you go and welcome the visitors when they arrive," the woman replied, shooing her away. "I'll serve the drinks when they come through."



The first to arrive were two remarkably similar looking older women, though one was a bit greyer haired than the other.

"Hello, Delphi!" one of them said brightly, strolling in before Delphi had time to speak. "It is rather nice to be back here after so many years, isn't it?" she asked, nudging the other woman.

"Smaller than I remember though..." said her companion, looking around. "Where is everyone? Through here?" And they walked through to the courtyard before Delphi could work out what to say.



Shortly afterwards, a sulky looking teenager arrived, holding hands with a tiny girl who looked extremely excited.

"We're here for the... whatever," mumbled the older girl.

"Party!" shouted the younger girl, jumping up and down. "Party! Party!"

"Oh for the gods' sake, just shut up, will you?" snapped the older girl. She gave Delphi a look. "I can't believe I was ever this annoying, can you?" The younger girl, whose hair was short but somehow familiar, let go of her hand and ran past Delphi into the courtyard, the other girl sighing as she followed.

Next to arrive was a rather grandly dressed woman holding a baby. She was wearing a headdress of olive leaves and what looked like golden jewellery. The effect was slightly spoiled by the smell coming from the baby.

"Hello! Have you got somewhere to change the baby?" Delphi frowned, wondering who she wanted the baby changing to, before she realised what she meant. "Oh, I'll find somewhere," the woman said, walking past her. "And maybe someone else to do it." Delphi heard the coos of delight from the other guests when she walked into the courtyard.



Last to arrive was perhaps the most ancient woman Delphi had ever seen, being led by another woman who was holding her arm. The younger woman looked dirty and tired, almost as if she had been travelling for weeks without a wash, but it was the older woman who Delphi couldn't take her eyes off. Her skin was as wrinkled as an old prune and she hobbled awkwardly inside with her eyes half closed, leaning on the other woman for support.

"I'll find you a chair!" Delphi declared, it being the only thing she could think of to say.



The courtyard had never been so packed. The little girl was running around between people's legs, while the other women were talking and laughing. They all looked like they knew one another. The baby was being passed around and the old woman was led to a chair in the shade of the women's quarters at the back. The teenage girl was helping herself to another cup of watered wine and the two middle aged women were already onto their second bowl of porridge. Most of the honey cake had disappeared already, Delphi noticed with horror. Zeno had curled up back in his shell with all the noise.

Delphi had no idea what to do. What was her dad going to say about this?

Noticing her expression, the first woman who had arrived came over to her.



"You OK? Cheer up a bit, it's pretty fun really. Dad kept a rather good larder, didn't he?"

Delphi looked at her.

"What's going on? Who are they all?"

The woman laughed. "You really haven't figured it out yet? I thought I was so clever when I was your age."

"Figured what out?" Delphi asked. "Just tell me!"

The woman knelt down so she was at eye-height.

"Delphi... I'd like you to meet Delphi," she pointed at herself, and then proceeded to point at all the others in turn. "And Delphi, and Delphi, and Delphi, and that's Delphi, and Delphi..." She stopped when she saw the younger Delphi's expression.

"They... they..."

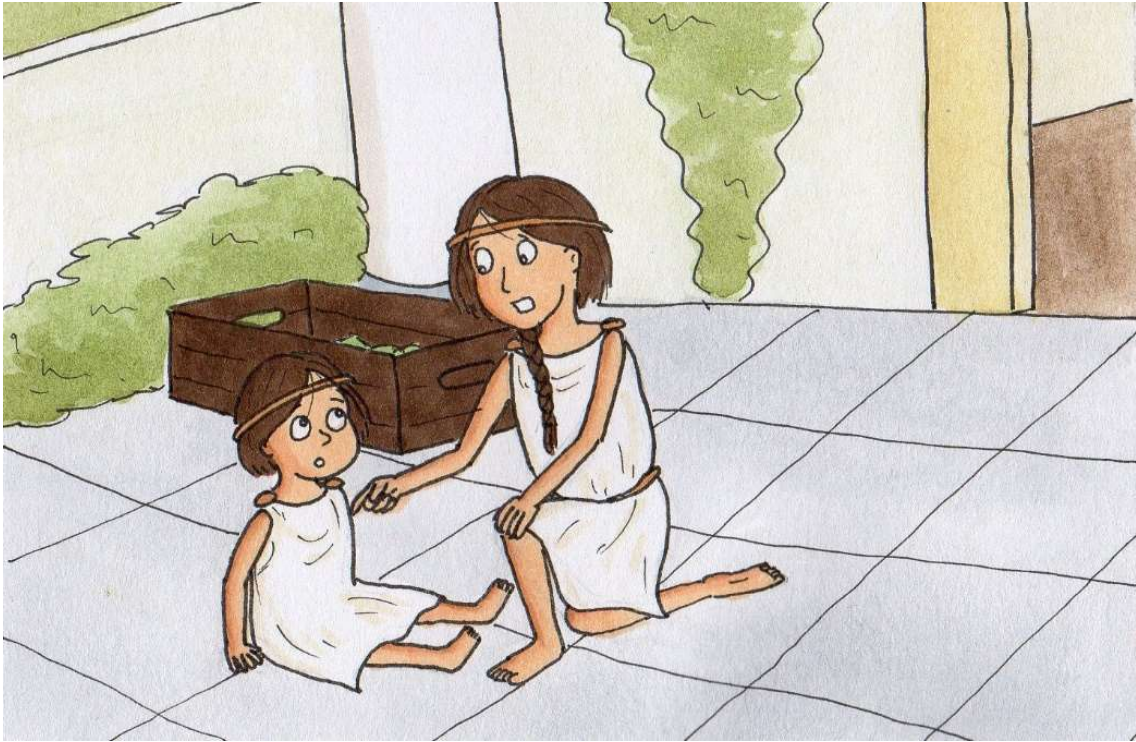
"They're all you. Well, we're all us!"

**What would you say?
What would make them
all the same person?**

"I don't believe you," Delphi said.

"You don't have to believe me," said the older Delphi. "Go and find out for yourself. See if you can find the thing that links us all together. Something that makes us all Delphi." And she walked back to the table of food to try and get hold of some of the honey cake before it all disappeared.

Delphi looked at each of the women. It couldn't be true, could it? OK, now that she was looking for it, she could see that many of the women did look quite similar in a way, but not all of them. Teenage-Delphi compared to old-woman-Delphi looked nothing like each other at all.



She suddenly felt a bang on the back of her legs as toddler-Delphi ran into her and fell over. Delphi turned around and bent down.

"Are you OK?" she asked, and picked the young girl up. She did look a bit like her, she had to admit, except she seemed to have bigger eyes. "You probably shouldn't run around like that with so many people here..." she suggested, trying to ignore the memory that she used to do it too.

"Tortus! Tortus!" the little girl laughed happily and ran over to see Zeno. "My tortus!"

Delphi followed her. "No, actually, it's my... Never mind. Leave him alone, OK?" But toddler-Delphi seemed not to hear her and started crawling around shouting "Tortus!" at the top of her little lungs.



"You look like you've been having some adventures, where have you been?" Middle-aged Delphi was talking to tired-traveller-Delphi nearby. The younger woman was trying to brush some dirt off her dress.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Oh, I do miss those outfits..." she sighed, nodding at fancy-Delphi, but then stopped because girl-Delphi was standing next to them.

"You can't all be me," said Delphi, flatly.

"Really? What makes you say that?" asked middle-aged Delphi.

"Well, I'm here, aren't I? And you're there," replied Delphi pointing at her. "We can't be the same person, we're in two different places!"

"But a minute ago, you were over there," replied fancy-Delphi, "Are you a different person now than who you were over there?"

"But that was before!" said Delphi.

"OK, are you a different person now than who you were a minute ago?" she asked again.

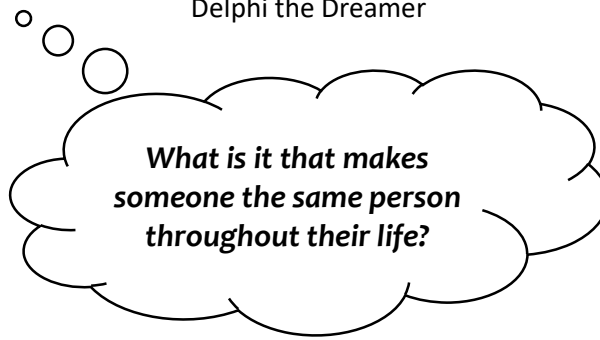
Delphi huffed at her. "My dad's right! I do ask annoying questions!" she declared. The other women laughed. "So why are we all the same then?"

"Must be something to do with memory," replied traveller-Delphi.

"No, I disagree, it must be something about the body carrying on over time," suggested fancy-Delphi.

"No, it must be something to do with us all being called Delphi, mustn't it?" asked middle-aged-Delphi.

"No, think about it! It can't rely on what other people call you," said grey-haired-Delphi. "It must be something to do with..." and the Delphis started arguing, even as the girl-Delphi desperately tried to listen and pick out an answer.



Delphi tried to follow their conversation but it became increasingly obvious that they were getting nowhere.



She stepped away and spotted teenage-Delphi lurking in the corner, hunched over a wax tablet. She was quite tall and had long brown hair tied in a messy bun. It was very hard to believe for Delphi that she was ever going to look like her.

"We're not the same person, are we?" Delphi asked, walking over. Teenage-Delphi sighed and gave her a withering stare.

"Just leave me alone, will you? I'm busy." Her eyes were fixed on her tablet.

"What are you doing?" Delphi asked, trying to see.

"I'm writing to my friends, gods, you're so annoying!" Delphi pulled a face at her.

"Do I really become you?"

Teenage-Delphi shrugged. "Sort of. Don't you know that thing?" she asked.

"What thing?" Teenage-Delphi gave her another why-is-everyone-so-stupid stare.

"That thing the natural philosophers say. That every part of your body slowly replaces itself after seven years?"

"What, really?" Delphi had never heard this before. "Do I just get new bits one day then?" She suddenly realised that teenage-Delphi's body had some rather different bits to hers.

"No, moron, your body's made of these things called cells and they replace themselves all the time. You can't even tell it's happening. Like you're always growing and changing. After 7 years or so, all the cells you once had have been changed." She sighed again, and finally looked at her younger self.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Nine," said Delphi.

"Well I'm sixteen," replied Delphi. "So, there you are. I might have a completely different body to you by now. Now leave me alone, alright?"

Delphi stepped away, her head spinning. She got a new body every seven years? It reminded her of the pile of grain at the docks and the ship that changed all its parts piece at a time. What was it that made them the same thing, if all the pieces that made them had changed? It must be the same for her. That meant that she had a completely different body to baby-Delphi. What was it that made them the same person?



She tried to spot the baby in the crowd of chatting women and found her in the arms of grey-haired Delphi.

"Can I see the baby?" Delphi asked, pulling at the older woman's dress.

"Of course you can, here you go!" and to Delphi's horror, she passed the baby down to her, even though it wasn't quite what Delphi had asked. She remembered just in time that you have to support the baby's head and was left with the little warm bundle in her arms, not quite knowing what to do next.

She looked down at herself. Surely it couldn't really be herself? She could never have had such a tiny squishy nose or such blobby fat cheeks. Something in Delphi cracked and she gave the baby a huge grin and a little squeeze. The baby slowly opened her eyes and two deep pools of infinite blue stared up at her.

"What is it that's the same about us then?" Delphi whispered, as she gently rocked from side to side, staring into her impossible eyes. "We've got the same name, but that doesn't make us the same person, does it? We're both girls, and we both like honey cake, or you will anyway, and maybe one day you'll look like me, but all your cells will have become a new person by then." The baby almost looked like it was

listening. "Maybe it's because I remember being a baby like you," she said, and then paused, because she wasn't sure she could really.

"Have you shown little Delphi to our oldest guest?" Delphi looked up to see her first visitor standing next to her. "Come on."

She led Delphi, still holding Delphi, across the courtyard and into the shade of the women's quarters. Sat on her grandmother's old chair, with her eyes closed, was the ancient-looking woman. Delphi couldn't even guess how old she was. She knelt down next to her and held out the baby so she was in the old woman's lap.



"Look," she whispered. "It's you. I think. Maybe. I don't know."

There was no reaction at first but then the ancient face began to soften and her dark eyes opened.

"Oh," she croaked, and then her face creased into a smile, and Delphi saw that there was still beauty in the old woman after all. The two Delphis stared at each other, holding each other's gaze.

"She doesn't remember," whispered the older Delphi, who had followed her.

"Doesn't remember what?"

"Her life," she replied. "She can't remember what she did, or who she was. She doesn't know that she's Delphi."

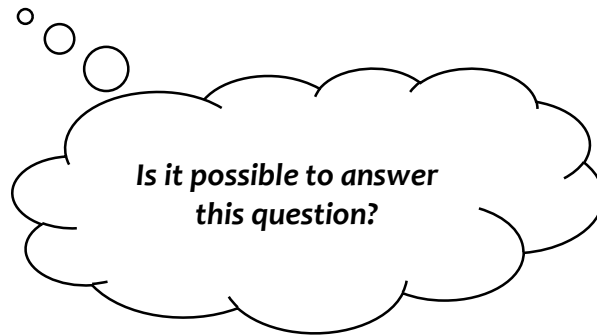
Delphi felt her hands shake as she lowered the baby onto the old woman's blanketed lap.

"That's really sad," she said, after a while.

"That's life, little one," said the older Delphi. "Everything will finish and be forgotten in the end. But she's still Delphi, isn't she?"

Delphi watched the ancient woman softly coo at the baby, an impossibly wrinkled hand shaking as it reached for those tiny fingers.

“So, what is it?” asked Delphi. “You said we were all the same person. How do you know that? What is it that makes me... me?” And a half-forgotten echo of a dream came back to her as she finally asked: “Who am I?”



There was silence.

“I don’t know,” replied older-Delphi. “We thought maybe that if we came to visit, you’d be able to see it. But maybe it’s too deep to see, or maybe there isn’t anything to see after all. But whatever it is, you’d better find your answer soon.”

“Answer to what?” Delphi asked.

“What you can believe in. Something that is real,” Delphi realised she was shivering, even though it wasn’t cold.

“I don’t understand,” she said.



“You will,” said the older-Delphi and turned to leave. “And when you meet him again, give him hell, OK?” She stopped at the doorway to the courtyard and looked at Delphi.

“It was nice to be back here again. Give your dad a hug for me. Oh, and tell Plato to stop stealing all our ideas and putting them into his books. And that I miss him,” she added, and walked out to the courtyard.

Delphi leaped up to follow her, but when she got there, she discovered the courtyard was empty – just the demolished remains of the food table, and a lot of honey cake crumbs over the floor. When she looked back into the women’s quarters there was just the empty chair, that Delphi vaguely remembered her grandmother holding her in when she was a baby.



She took a few steps forward and looked at the mess, just as she heard familiar footsteps from the front of the house and her dad walked in.

He looked at the courtyard, the remains of the food, the half-finished bowls of porridge, the shattered crumbs of honey cake. He was just breathing in to start shouting when Delphi ran over and gave him a huge hug, squeezing the shout out of him.

“I had a feast dad,” Delphi said. “Just for me.”

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Details of life in ancient Athens are drawn from several sources, most notably The World of Athens (Cambridge University Press, 2008). Also invaluable was The Hemlock Cup by Bettany Hughes (Vintage, 2011). Delphi the Dreamer is fictional but has been written to at least be consistent with historical events and practices. Any errors in that regard are my own.