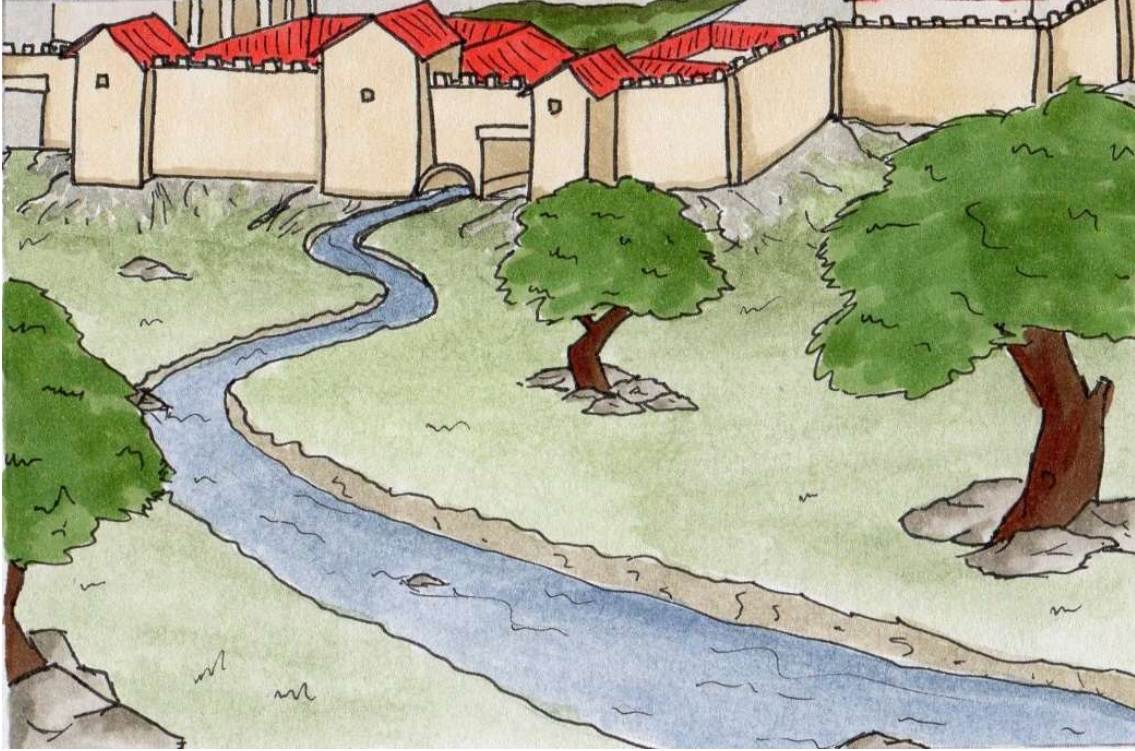


# CHAPTER 5

## THE RIVER



The river that flowed through Athens wasn't much of a river. It was not one of those wide, impressive rivers with postcard bridges that you see in other cities around the world today. In fact, you can't even find the river today. Its name was the Eridanos.

*Say it like this!*  
*Eh-rih-dan-os*

In Delphi's time, it was something like a large stream, and didn't flow particularly quickly. This was possibly because the people of Athens treated their river as an all-in-one washing machine, dishwasher, bathtub, rubbish dump and, occasionally, toilet. The water tended to get clogged up by everything else.

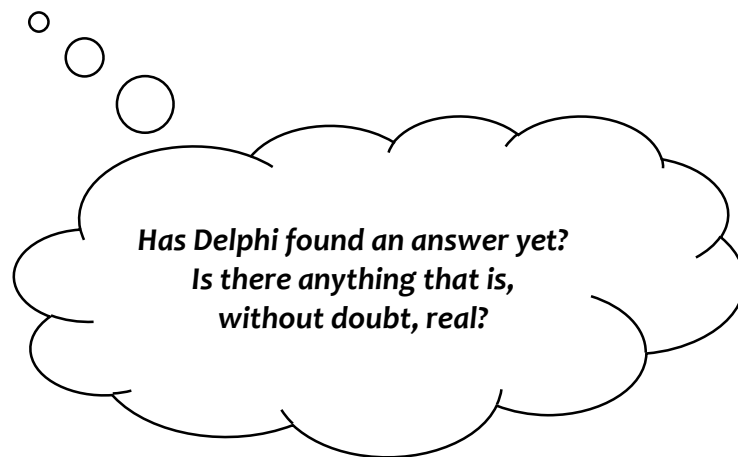
But Delphi quite liked it, particularly when she could follow it upriver from the Agora, through the Kerameikos, out of the city near the Sacred Gate, and up towards the hills. Here the water was cleaner and had no idea what was in store for it. Her family would take her up here when she was younger, and it was a good place to go and play. In the Spring, the trees were covered in little white blossoms, and in the Autumn, you could kick your way through piles of leaves, if you didn't mind what animals had done under them. On late summer days like this one, you could splash around in the cool water without treading in anything too sticky.

## Delphi the Dreamer



Delphi thought she should come up here as it was a good place to think. She wasn't sure what she wanted to think about. But she had a vague feeling that she was forgetting something important. Something about what is real, and who she is. And something about yellow eyes.

We of course know Delphi is remembering a dream she had where a demon challenged her to find the answers to these questions, at the cost of her soul. Delphi does not remember making this deal with a demon. But she soon would.





Delphi jumped into the river with a splash, sending a pair of ducks honking and flapping in panic. The water was cold enough to make her yelp but not so cold that she wanted to get out again. It was a hot day and Delphi had to admit it was nice to wash the grime off her feet from time to time. The water came up to just under her knees, so it was also a perfect height for kicking.

She splashed across the river to the other side then turned around and splashed her way back again. There was the odd brown leaf floating on the surface now. This would probably be the last time this year she could do this without her toes freezing off.

The ducks had settled back on the river a little way downstream and were bobbing their heads under the water, and pointedly ignoring Delphi. She gave them one of her nastier stares. In some ways, Delphi had always been rather jealous of birds.

“If I could be any animal,” she said out-loud, punctuating each word with a heavy splash of her feet. “I... would... be... a... bird,” she finished, then added to herself: one of the big, fast ones. The ones that could see everything and travel all over the world. Delphi had always thought she’d be good at flying.



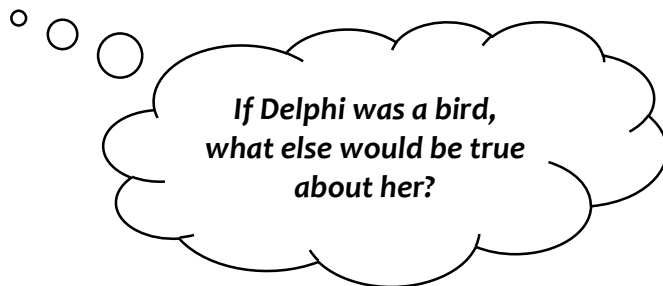
Delphi hopped up onto a rock.

“I should be able to fly if I was a bird...” she thought, out loud. Most birds could fly, couldn’t they? But maybe not all of them. She would definitely have wings though. All birds had wings. She jumped off the rock but didn’t fly very far.

Ah, but if she really was a bird that could fly, she could live in a tree and go flying wherever, and whenever, she wanted to. She wouldn’t have to stay at home or do sewing or washing or anything like that. She could fly into the city and watch all the plays and performances that she wasn’t allowed to go to, and listen to all the gossip that she wasn’t supposed to understand. Then when she got bored, she could flap her wings and soar into the sky so high that even the gods would have to crane their necks to look up at her. Then she could soar back down again, find all the people she didn’t like, and poo on their heads.

Then again, she could be a bird that did none of those things. And she would definitely have to eat bugs or seeds.

She tried flapping her arms and running through the river a few times, but it wasn’t quite the same.



When she had stopped being a bird, Delphi paused in the middle of the river and looked around. The furious splashes she had made had settled back into the calm flow once again. It was like she had never been there. But she had been coming here as long as she could remember.

“I wonder how many times I’ve crossed you, little river?” she asked, into the air.

“It is your first time.”



The reply, softly spoken as it was, made Delphi turn quickly, give a little scream and then fall headfirst into the water. She sat up, soaked and panicked. She had been alone. She knew she had been alone.

But now, in front of her, was a woman, though not a woman, Delphi knew instantly. This woman’s skin was a very pale blue, her hair was a light stone grey and her eyes were the deep green of spring leaves. She was dressed in something lacy which seemed to blur in her vision as it merged into the surface of the water. Everything about her... shimmered. Delphi couldn’t quite look at her properly.

“Were you watching me? I wasn’t pretending to be a bird or anything!” she said quickly.

Delphi left a pause but the woman, if that’s what it was, only responded with a ripple of a smile.

“Who are you?” Delphi asked, her eyes wide.

The woman placed her hand onto the surface of the water, sending circles in every direction, like a surge of power.

“I am the river,” she said simply.

*Say it like this!*  
Niy-ad

“You’re a naiad?” asked Delphi, her mouth hanging open. “A river spirit?” Like all children in Athens, Delphi had been raised with a steady stream of stories about naiads, nature spirits and minor gods. Like everyone else, she’d always assumed they existed, but you never saw one because they hid away from humans. They weren’t supposed to just appear in front of you and say hello.

The spirit laughed. It sounded like water trickling over dry stones.

"You asked me a question," the spirit said.

"Did I?"

"You asked me how many times you have crossed this river," said the river spirit. "And I say, this is your first time."

Delphi's brain started to click back to life as she struggled to stand up again. It knew an argument was coming.

"It isn't actually. I've crossed this river loads of times." Delphi insisted, but the spirit just shook her head and smiled.

"It is impossible to step in this river more than once," said the spirit.

"No, it isn't!" said Delphi. "I could do it again now!"

The river spirit seemed to fade for a second before returning even closer to Delphi.



"Are you... challenging me?" she whispered.

"What? No, I mean..."

"Very well," said the spirit coolly. "Step in the same river twice and the waters will not claim your soul."

"Claim my soul?" asked Delphi, both horrified and fascinated at the same time. This kind of thing tended to happen in the stories too, she now remembered, too late. People being pulled down into the water, and turned into flowers and that sort of thing. She thought about it.

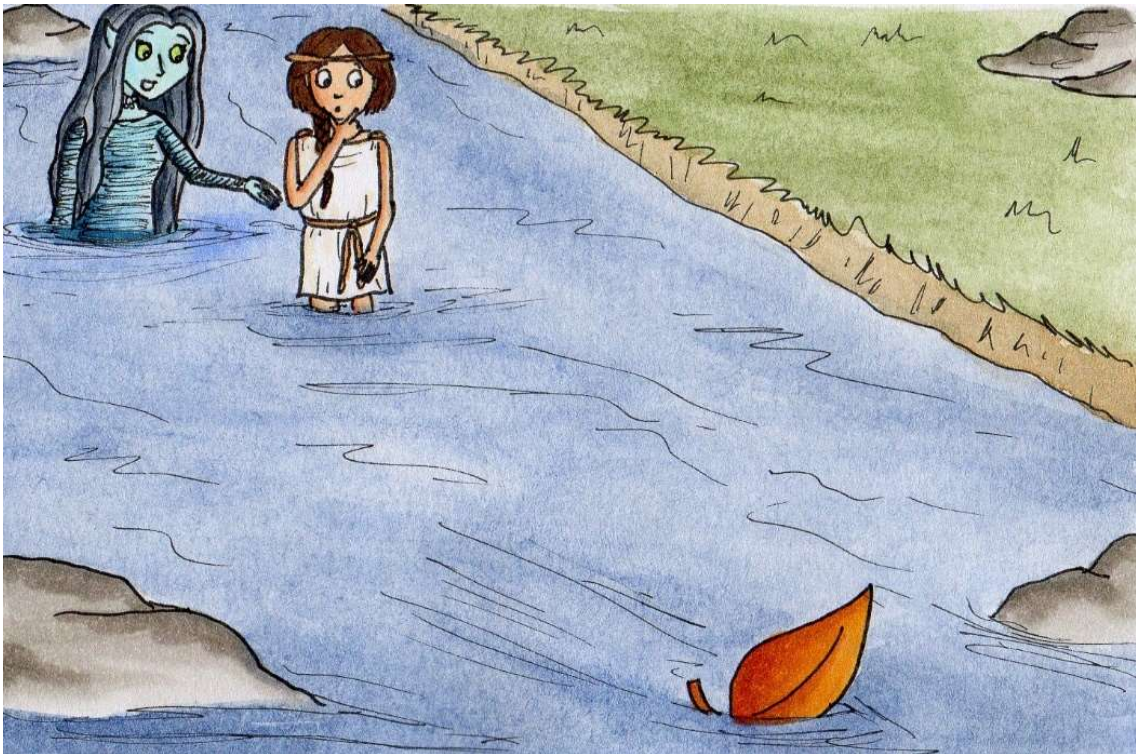
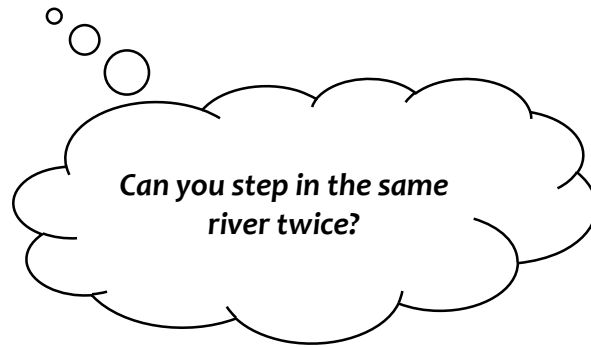
"Wow," she said, eventually. "So I'd just be a body with no soul, or would I be a soul with no body? Like, if I'm just a soul then do I go flying about without a body, like a ghost? Or am I just stuck in my body but without a soul? Like a zombie!" she added, excitedly.

Delphi pretended to be a zombie for a few seconds before remembering who she was talking to. The river spirit looked momentarily confused, but then her face flowed back into its serene form once again. It remained silent, watching Delphi with strange but focused eyes.

## Delphi the Dreamer

Delphi lowered her arms and sighed. It didn't matter anyway.

Surely you can step into the same river twice?



Delphi, feeling rather self-conscious, stepped out the river and then stepped into it again.

"There," she said. "I've stepped in the same river twice."

The river spirit smiled but shook her head.

"Part of the river is the water. And the water has flowed on," she said, gesturing towards a brown leaf floating slowly down the stream on the current.

Delphi's eyes widened as she realised what the river-spirit meant.

"So the water I stepped in the first time has moved on a bit? Wait!"



Delphi started leaping into the water again, following the current downstream. She splashed about a bit, treading in one part of the flow, and then another. After thirty seconds of splashing, she stopped, out of breath.

“There! That was definitely the same bit of water twice!” she declared, but even as she said it, she watched the water at her ankles drift and spin and scatter, and she knew that the water could never be the same twice.

She looked up at the river spirit, biting her lip. She was still standing with her hands on the water, ripples running away from her. She seemed bigger somehow. Her voice was strangely calm.

“The water is part of the river. If the water changes, then the river would also change. It is no longer the same river.” Her bright green eyes focused down on Delphi. “So how can you step in the same river twice? A river is never the same twice.”

“But it’s still the same river...” Delphi protested.

“How can it be the same if it has changed?” replied the river spirit, and reached out towards Delphi. “And now the waters shall take you.” Her eyes narrowed and flashed yellow.





“Wait!” cried Delphi, as realisation, horror and memory finally flooded her mind. “It’s you, isn’t it?”

The river spirit’s lips slowly curled up in a cat-like smile. Gently, she started to sing.

“Poor little Delphi,  
Looking for truth.  
Thinks she has an answer,  
But never has proof.”

Delphi folded her arms. “That doesn’t even rhyme properly.” She stared at the river spirit, defiantly. “I thought I dreamt you.”

“Maybe you did?” said the river spirit. She sounded, and indeed looked, nothing at all like the first time Delphi had met the Demon. But there was something in the eyes that she recognised and had seen time and time again since. She could hear the cackle creeping into the river spirit’s voice too. “It no longer matters. The river will claim your soul.”

“Wait!” Delphi cried. “We’re not finished yet!” She tried to think quickly. “You said the river was always changing, yes?”

“Of course,” replied the spirit.

“Well, it can’t just be the river that’s changing then, can it?” Delphi wasn’t sure where she was going with this, but her mind had found just the edge of an idea.

The spirit narrowed her eyes at her.

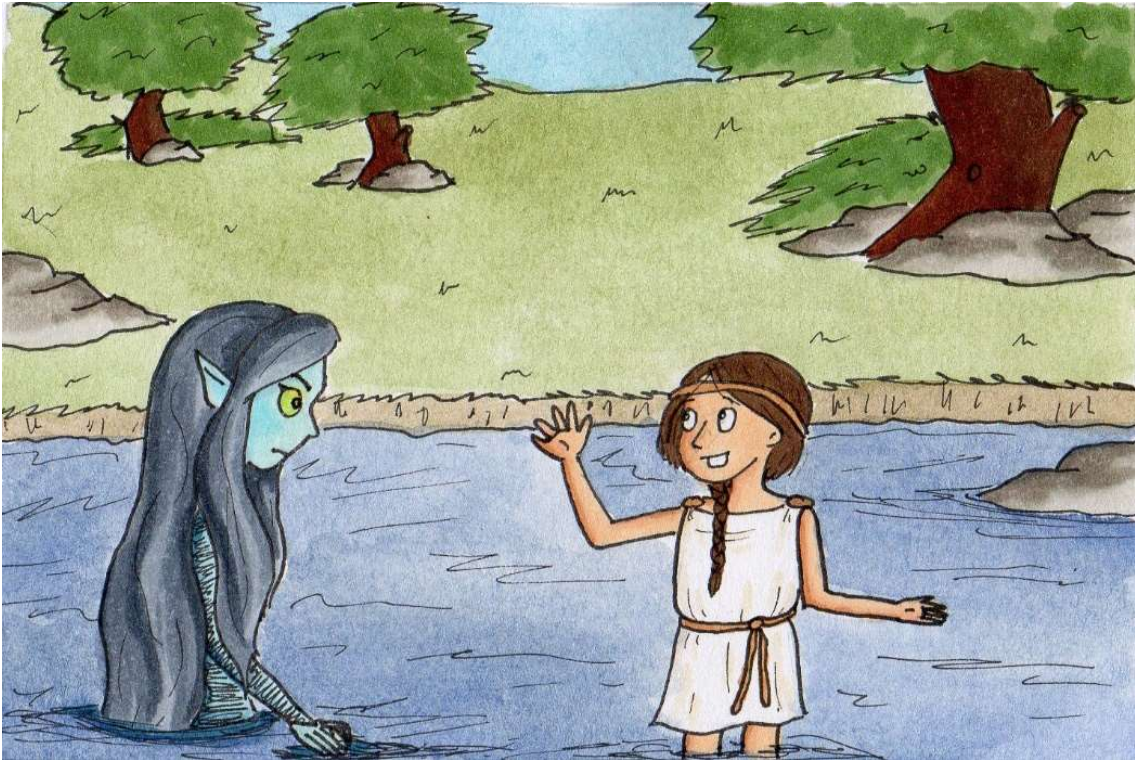
“What do you mean?”

“If the river is always changing, then that means...”

Delphi the Dreamer

*If the river is always  
changing, then what else  
is also changing?*

“...then the forest would have changed too?”



The river spirit was looking at her curiously. “Of course, but why...”

“And if the forest has changed, then the world has changed! It isn’t the same as it was. And if the world has changed then the Universe has changed!” Delphi looked up to the sky as the enormity of this thought hit her. Sure enough, the clouds above her were moving steadily across the sky, forming new shapes, changing the light on the surface of the river. A breeze rustled the leaves and the branches danced in strange patterns and moment by moment, second by second, the world changed.

“I fail to see your point,” said the river spirit coldly, bringing Delphi’s thoughts back to earth.

“But if the Universe has changed,” Delphi continued, “then I have too. I’m not the same person who got into the river the first time, am I? If you’re right, and the river is never the same twice, then... nor am I. I’m different to the Delphi who came here a few months ago. If I step out of the river...” she paused as once again she stepped out onto the muddy shore, then turned around. Glancing down, she noticed there was a small cut on her big toe. She must have cut it on a stone in the river or something. She hadn’t noticed before.

“Look – the person who got in the river before didn’t have a cut on their toe. But now I do.” She stepped in the river again. “You can’t step in the same river twice because you’re never the same person twice!”

The river spirit smiled again, as if Delphi had just made the worst possible move in a board game.

“But that’s what I said to you...” she began.

“Yeah!” Delphi shouted over her, her voice growing louder. “That’s what you said to the old Delphi! I’m a different person now! It wasn’t me who said I could step in the same river twice!”

The river spirit paused, looking uncertain.

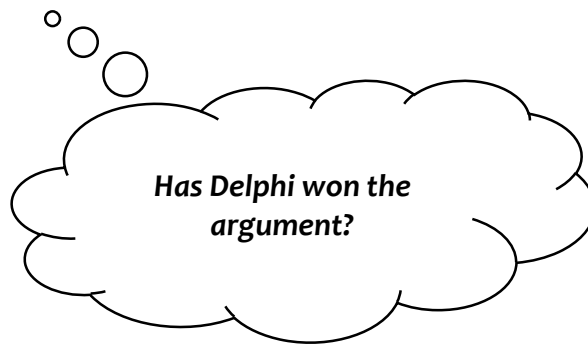
“You made the bet with another Delphi, but she’s gone! You can’t punish me for it. I’m not the same person who made that bet.” Delphi grinned at her. “You have to let me go then.”

The river spirit faded in and out a few times, doubt washing over her.

“But it was you...” she said, eventually.

“Was it?” asked Delphi, with a slightly unhinged smile. “What was it that made me the same person then as I am now? My body’s changed. My mind’s changed. I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately and I can’t work out what stays the same. Are you going to tell me what it is then?”

But the water spirit stayed silent, her yellow eyes flashing with anger.



“Fine,” snapped the river spirit. “The waters will not claim you. As you say, you are a different person now to the girl who first stepped in a river. It is true that knowledge changes a person.”

“There,” said Delphi, nodding. “Now I’m going home. Don’t come in my dream again OK, or I’ll... I’ll... just don’t, OK?” Delphi turned and stepped out of the river, but looked back when she heard the river spirit

laugh again. Except it didn't sound like water flowing over stones anymore. It sounded much less pleasant.

"You think you have won?" came the voice, and it was no longer soothing and calm, but shifting and distorted, like five people all speaking at once.

Delphi turned to face her. It. "Yeah, because..."

"Everything you have said only makes your task harder," insisted the voice. "If everything is changing all the time, then what would you say is real? If the Universe is being destroyed and remade differently at every moment, then where is your truth?" Delphi bit her lip. "And if you are not the same person at every moment – who are you?"

Delphi opened her mouth to reply but realised she had no idea what to say.

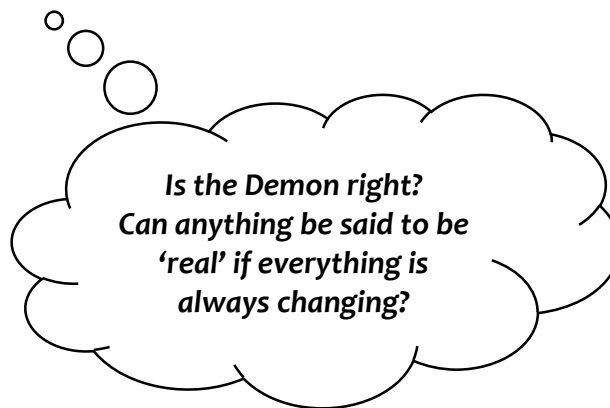
"If there is nothing but change," said the Demon. "Then nothing can exist."

"You're wrong!" shouted back Delphi. "I exist! So does everything else!"

The Demon grinned and blinked its yellow eyes slowly.

"Prove it," it purred.

Delphi turned away and ran for it.



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*The problem of 'not being able to step in the same river twice' in this story is an ancient logical problem, attributed to Heraclitus, and later taken on by other philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein.*

*This enquiry began life as a lesson delivered from The If Machine by Peter Worley (Bloomsbury, 2011) – a wonderful resource and the book which began all of this.*

*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.*