Say it like this!
Pih-thee-ur

CHAPTER 3
PYTHIA AND ARISTOCLES

Say it like this!
Ah-rist-oh-clees

Delphi flopped down into the dust, her back against the wall and looked into the mirror.

She was in the Agora, the central marketplace, government centre and heart of Athens. She was not supposed to be there. Women, particularly young girls, were not technically allowed in, but Delphi had always seen this as more of a challenge than a rule, so she spent as much time there as she could. She liked the way it never looked the same twice. There were always people coming and going, new market stalls, new gossip to listen to and new places to explore. This was a good spot, out of sight of the main street but close enough to watch the Water Clock, a dripping jug which slowly measured out the time. Now the trough underneath the jug was almost full, and the sun was setting, and Delphi sat in the gloom, looking into the mirror.

"Delphi, you shouldn't be here!"

Delphi looked up, and into Plato's round, worried face.

"Ssshh! Sit down!" Delphi hissed, glancing around to make sure no-one had seen them. Plato was not particularly good at going unnoticed in a crowd, mainly because he was so broad-shouldered, and well… big. He was sort of a crowd all by himself.

Plato plonked himself onto the ground next to her. He looked at the copper mirror in Delphi's hands.

"Fancy. Where d'you get that?" he asked.

"From one of the market stalls. The seller was selling it off cheap, so I got it. Only cost a few obols." Delphi looked into the mirror again. The Delphi in the reflection frowned back at her.

"He was a bit weird though," she added, looking at Plato. "He had this strange voice and his eyes were a bit sort of… yellow." This felt important for some reason, but she couldn't quite remember why.

Plato shrugged. You got all sorts of strange people in the Agora.

"Nobody else saw you then?" he asked.

Delphi made a frustrated little blowing noise through her teeth and then looked back into the mirror.

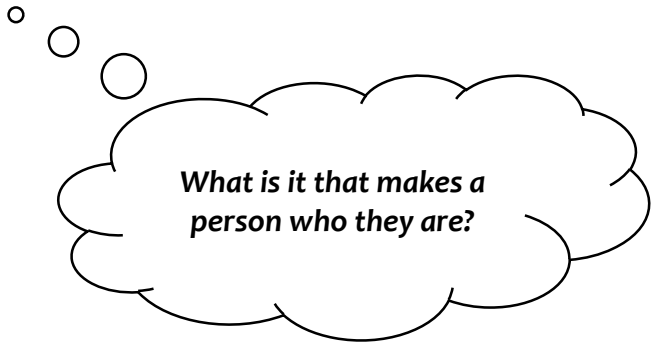
"It's not fair," said Delphi, at the same time as the Delphi in the mirror. "It's rubbish having to sneak around everywhere and being caught the whole time. It's alright for you. You're not supposed to spend your entire life at home doing the cleaning and washing and…" she paused, trying to remember what it was, "sewing and stuff."

Plato sighed. He had heard this before. "You never do any of those things anyway," he pointed out.

"I do! You don't know!" she insisted. "All I get to do is stay at home and do jobs. I never get to do anything interesting, like go to school or the gymnasium or anything like you do. My life's rubbish. I don't even look that good." She scowled at the scowling face in the mirror.

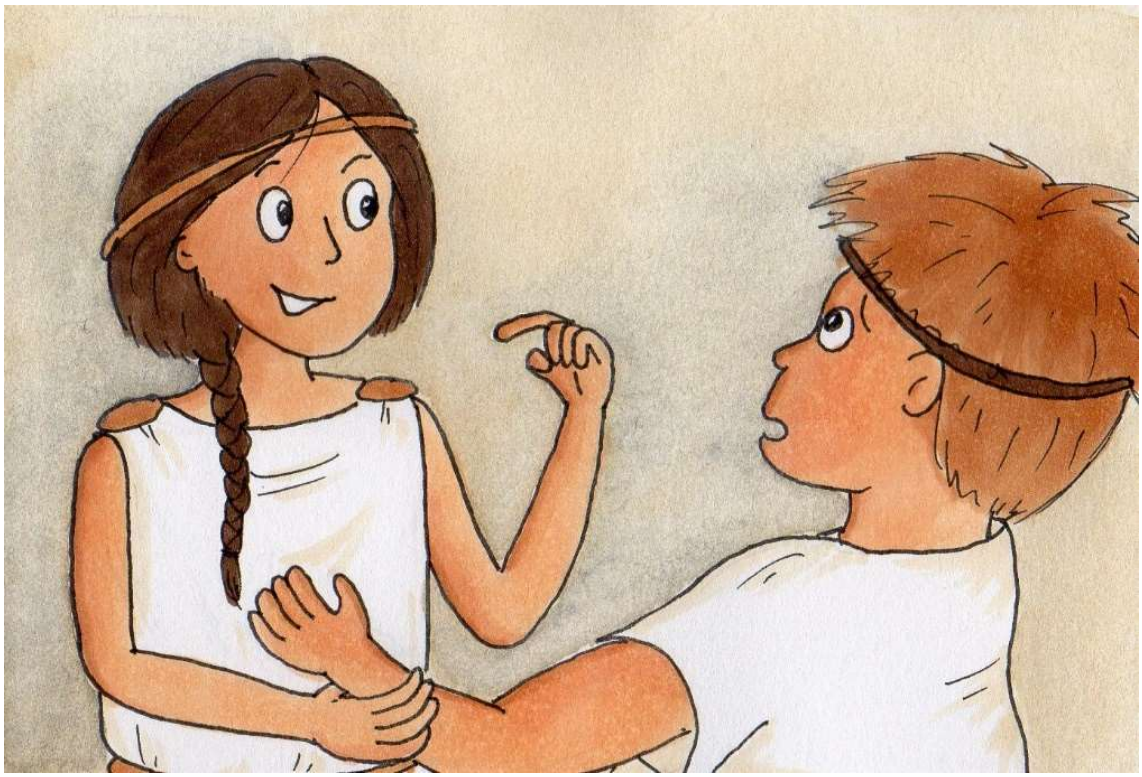
Plato felt like he should say something but wasn't quite sure what was best. This sounded like a trap. The kind of trap he'd fallen into before.

"I don't think any of that matters," he said. "I have to do all that stuff, and it's mostly pretty boring, trust me. It doesn't matter what you do or what you look like. None of that stuff changes who you actually are. You're Delphi." He paused and waited for her reaction.



"I know I'm Delphi!" she snapped, the mirror falling into her lap as she rolled her eyes at him. "That's the problem!" Plato opened his mouth, thought better of it, then closed it again.

Delphi stared into the mirror once more, and then suddenly, she got an idea.



"Wait… What if… I wasn't Delphi?" she announced, a strange smile on her face.

"What?"

"I mean… hardly anybody knows my name really. Most people don't know who I am. If I change my name, then I can be someone else, right?"

"I dunno…" Plato replied, scratching his chin. This sounded like one of Delphi's ideas that always seemed to lead to trouble.

"You could do it too," she insisted, standing up. "If it's so boring, then you could change your name and be somebody else." She grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. "Just for a day. Tomorrow. Let's try it. We'll spend the whole day being someone different with a different name and then meet back here at sunset to report back. What do you say?"

Plato wiped off the dust from his tunic to avoid answering.

"Um... What name would you use instead?" he asked.

Delphi thought for a moment.

“Pythia,” she said. “That was the name my dad said they almost called me. Don’t know why they didn’t. What name are you going to change yours to?”

Plato mumbled something and looked at his feet.

“What?”

“I said… I’ve already changed my name,” he said again, this time just loud enough to be heard. Delphi was stunned.

“Really? Plato’s not your real name? Why have you never told me? What is your real name?” she demanded.

Plato’s voice came out rather small. “Aristocles.”

Delphi roared with laughter. “What kind of a name is that?”

Plato’s face went a furious red. “It’s just the name I was born with, alright? Then they started calling me Plato because… um…”

Delphi gave him a pointed look, even as she bit her lip trying not to laugh.

“Because it means… um… wide, like… big shoulders… because…” and he stopped because Delphi was almost falling over laughing again. He glared at her until she’d finished. It had grown a bit darker by that point.

“OK, OK,” she giggled, eventually. “You can try being Aristocles for the day, and I’ll be Pythia. We go somewhere where nobody knows us and we can see if it changes who we are, OK?”

Aristocles nodded, resigned to his fate.

“See you tomorrow, Aristocles!” Delphi laughed.

“See you tomorrow, Pythia,” sighed Plato.

Pythia's day was not quite what she was expecting.

Say it like this!
Oh-limp-ee-on

Say it like this!
Zyoos

She decided to go to Olympieion, a district where they were building an enormous temple to Zeus, if only because it was quite far from where she lived, and she was unlikely to see anyone she knew.

At first, she didn't know what to do with her new identity. She went up to a couple of the local children and made a great point of saying her name was Pythia, but they didn't seem all that interested. She tried to speak to some of the adults, but she was generally ignored or told to go home, which is pretty much what happened when Delphi tried it too.

The worst moment was when she was watching the slaves dragging the heavy marble for the columns into place for the temple, and a guard had appeared behind her. He had asked for her name, and she had said:

"Pythia". Then he had asked for her father's name, and she had looked around, caught her reflection in the guard's polished armour, panicked and said: "Armour…clees?"

This had not gone down well. The guard shouted across to the slave master and asked if she was one of his. Delphi ran for it. The guard didn't notice for a few seconds, which gave her enough of a head start. He was quick, but Delphi, or possibly Pythia, daughter of Armourclees, was quicker. She hid in the shadows of a building until the guard went away and her heartbeat had slowed down to a purr.

She got back to the Agora just as the sun was setting and the last trickle of water was filling the stone basin of the water clock. A mangy, yellow-eyed cat was sat on the stones nearby. Plato, no – Aristocles, was waiting for her.

"So how was it?" he asked. "Feel any different?"

Delphi-Pythia slumped back down to the floor and tried to get her breath back. Her hand fell on the mirror in the dust. She'd forgotten she'd left it there.

"It was… OK, I suppose," she admitted. "It didn't really feel any different. But then, a guard thought I was a slave so I had to run away." She paused, and then brightened up. "What happened to you, A-rist-o-cleeees?" she over-pronounced.

Aristocles sat down next to her. "Nothing much," he admitted. "It was pretty boring really. I couldn't go to school, or go to the gymnasium because nobody knew who I was. Usually, I just have to say my father's name and I get let in anywhere because people have heard of him. But I thought that'd be cheating." Pythia nodded approvingly.

"Maybe names are just so other people can recognise you," Pythia suggested, looking into the mirror again. "Other people treat you different, maybe, but… I didn't really feel any different. Did you?"

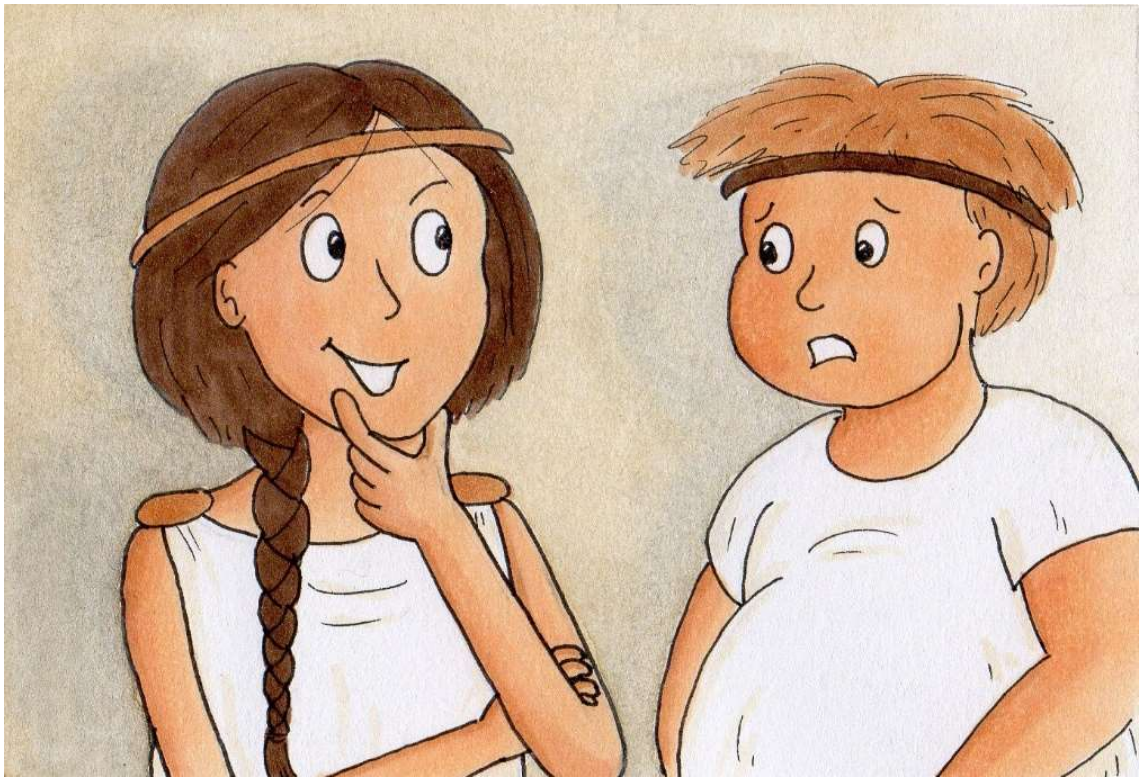
"Not really," Aristocles admitted. "I think I like being Plato more though."

Delphi stared into the mirror until her reflection appeared to have another idea.

“Wait, it’s not our names that’s important, is it? We still look the same!” Her reflection pulled a face at her, so she pulled one back.

“What are you suggesting?” Plato asked, unsure of where this was going.

“If we want to try being someone different, then we can’t look the same! We’ll just get treated as kids whatever happens. But what if we look different? Like… adults?” Delphi’s eyes lit up.



“Delphi, no, that’s not going to…”

“Meet me at my house first thing tomorrow morning,” Delphi said, her mouth curling up into a grin. “I’ve got a plan!”

Does what you look like decide who you are?
If you change your appearance, then are you someone else?

They got to work as soon as Delphi's dad had left for work that morning.

Delphi found a large, not-quite-white-any-more, dress that had once belonged to her mother and wrestled herself into it. She unbraided her hair, letting it fall down her back, and then following a rumour she'd once heard, mixed lye-soap and wood ash to make a foul-smelling paste. The idea was, if she rubbed it into her hair and sat in the sun for a bit, then it would dye it a lighter colour. She wasn't sure if this was going to work, but she certainly smelt different now.

Plato experimented with combed sheep's wool and tree sap to make himself a beard, and then wrapped a large toga around himself. Height was a bit of a problem for them both, though in the end they decided they could get away with strapping some wooden blocks underneath their sandals as their clothes were so big no-one could see their feet anyway. They'd just have to walk carefully.

By the time they were finished, Delphi couldn't help but be impressed. Plato looked like a little old man, tottering along with his scraggy beard. When Delphi checked herself in a mirror, a rather odd blonde woman stared back at her. She wasn't sure whether she looked good exactly, but she certainly looked… different. Plato kept staring at her when he thought she wasn't watching.

Say it like this!
Keh-ra-mihk-os

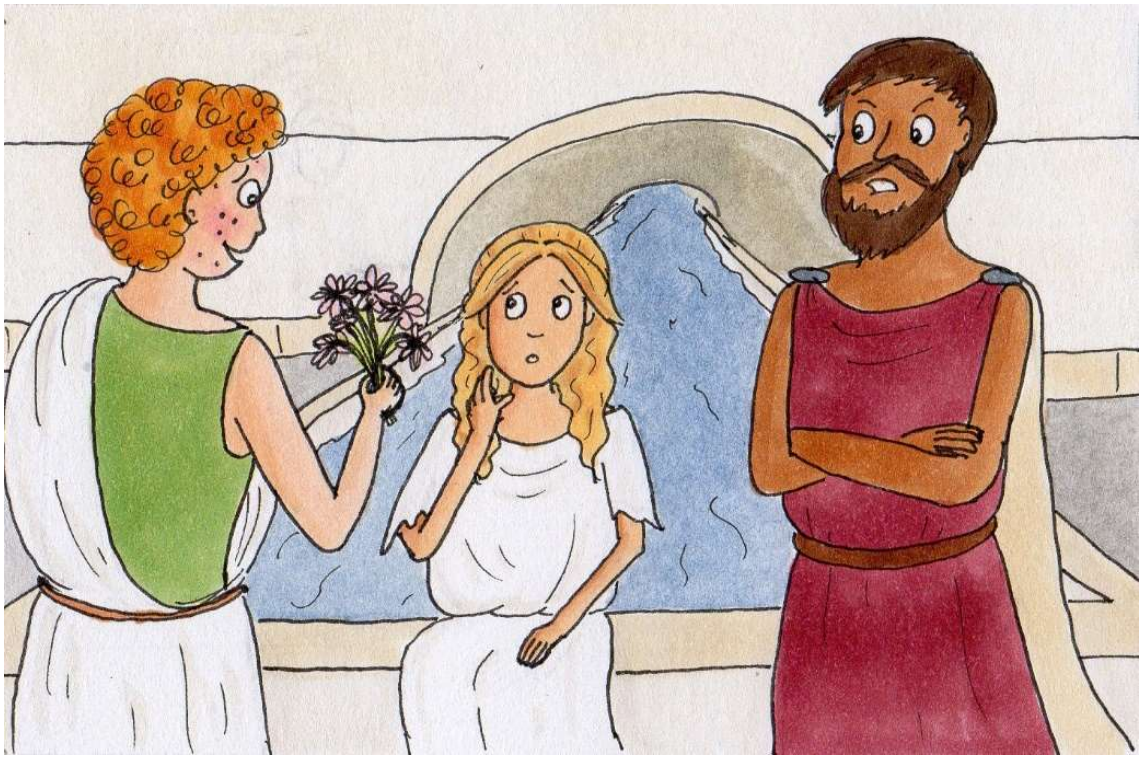
They agreed to meet back at the water clock at sunset and decided to split up to try and avoid any unnecessary attention. Delphi nervously stumbled over to the Kerameikos district, near the main gates into the city. It was dangerously close to where her dad worked, but being near the gates meant she would mainly see newcomers to the city so she was less likely to be recognised.

What followed was possibly the strangest afternoon in Delphi's life.

She had decided to sit in the shade near the fountain so she could watch the passers-by, but she didn't remain undisturbed for long. First, there were women who kept wanting to talk to her, asking for her name, where she lived, who her father was, peppering her with questions. Delphi stuck to being Pythia, but apart from that, tried to keep things as vague as possible.

The women seemed quite happy to treat Delphi as one of their own, and she listened with interest as they chatted, hearing gossip about two people she'd never heard of, and hearing them complain about their husbands. There was one other girl, who was probably only a few years older than Delphi, who was rather upset because her father had chosen a husband for her, and she loved someone else. She whispered about her fears in a shaky, deep voice and Delphi listened, transfixed. It was like another world. After a while and slightly to her surprise, she found that she was rather enjoying herself. It didn't even feel like she was pretending any more.

However, the women soon turned to leave, and Delphi made her excuses, saying her father had told her to wait here for him. This got a few raised eyebrows from the other women, but this didn't worry Delphi half as much as what happened next.



As soon as she was left alone, a young man with a lot of spots on his face approached her, with a strange, wonky grin and clutching a handful of droopy flowers. He gave the flowers to the astonished Delphi, told her she was 'more beautiful than the dawn', and then asked for her name.

Before she could answer, another man approached them. This one was taller with a dark beard, called her 'my fair maiden', and asked her if this man was bothering her. This seemed to irritate the first man and soon they were shouting at each other, while Delphi sat, terrified, as the argument got louder. Soon another couple of men joined in, one of them threatening to punch out another one, and another threatening to read her a poem. She wasn't sure which was worse.

To her horror, she realised that by now everyone on the street was looking at her. All the men seemed to be either trying to call her strange names or read her things, or else were trying to push each other out the way. None of them had waited for her say anything, she noticed. It did not feel very nice.

Eventually, a local guard wandered over to see what was going on and Delphi used this distraction to suddenly leap up, grab as much of her dress in her arms as she could and run for it. The astonished men were left looking at a pair of sandals in the dust, with two blocks of wood tied to them.

Does the way other people treat you change who you are?

Delphi ran back to the shade of the building behind the water clock in the Agora. She had to wait for a while before Plato appeared. When she got thirsty, she took a quick drink from the clock when no-one was watching, except for a local cat. She was sure no-one would miss a few seconds.

The sun was casting the Agora in an orange glow by the time Plato appeared, but Delphi didn't recognise him at first. He was walking, somewhat awkwardly, with another group of men down the road, and was in deep conversation. The other men were listening to him and nodding, and one of them even patted him on the back at one point. Delphi watched with horrified suspicion.

Plato nodded his farewell and walked round the corner to find a furious Delphi glaring at him.

"Where have you been?" she snapped. "I've been waiting here for…"

"Delphi, it was brilliant!" Plato interrupted. "They listened to everything I had to say! Everyone treats you properly when you look like an adult. When we started talking about philosophy, they actually agreed with me! One of them said I should write a book. It was *amazing*!" Plato was almost leaping from one foot to another in his excitement, at least until Delphi reached up, grabbed his woollen beard, and yanked it off.

“Ow!”

Plato fell off his wooden blocks and collapsed in a heap.

“No, it wasn’t, it was awful!” Delphi shouted down at him. Plato appeared to notice her expression for the first time.

“Why? What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” Delphi folded her arms and spat at the wall.

“Um… OK?” Plato replied, sadly pulling off the remaining pieces of his beard. He silently started to count in his head. He got as far as two, when:

“It’s not fair! It’s all just because you’re a boy! Men get treated properly here, and women don’t. We’re just supposed to sit quietly and let men do whatever they like. I can’t be a different person! I’m stuck being a girl,” she said, and slumped down on the floor next to him. She found the mirror under her hand. Had she left it here again? She looked into it and an upset woman looked back at her.

“Would it really make that much difference if you were a boy?” asked Plato. Delphi thought about it. Would she then be a different person?

“Yes,” she decided. “Changing your name and what you look like… it doesn’t change who you are. But that would change everything.”

They both looked into the mirror, squinting in the gathering dark. Delphi suddenly felt very tired.

“So what if… we swap then?” Plato asked.

“What?” mumbled Delphi. His voice sounded like something far away.

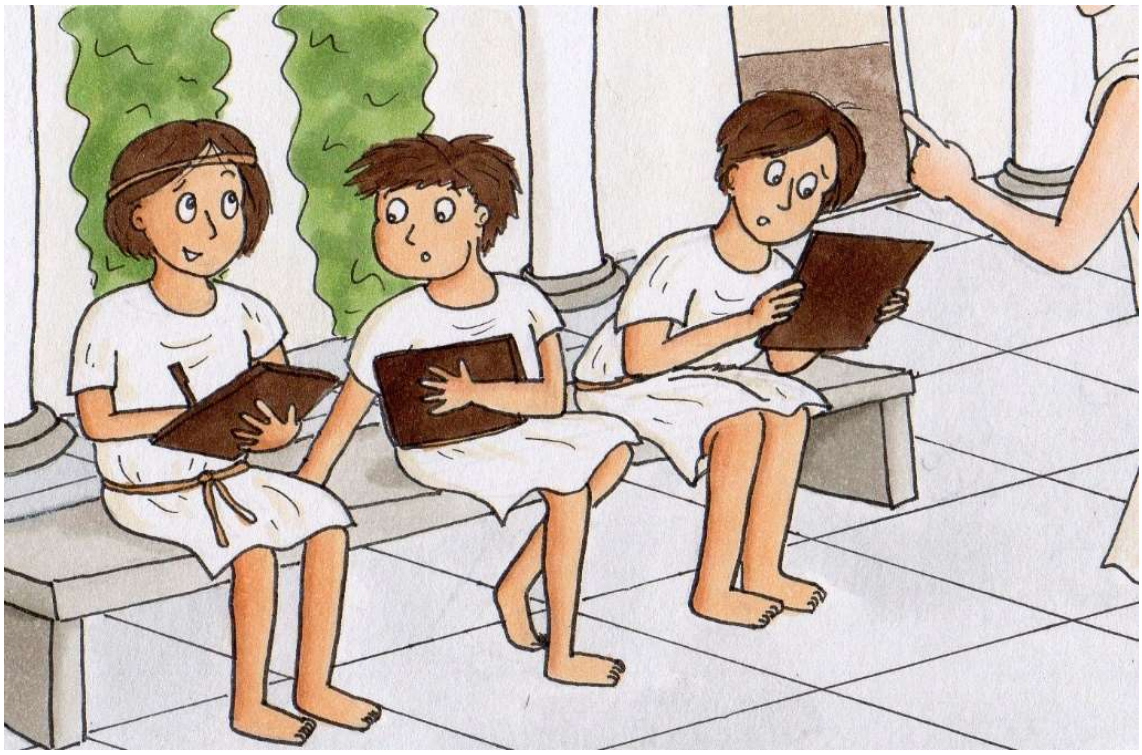
“I’ll swap you. You be a boy and I’ll be a girl. Meet you back here at sunset.”

Would you be the same person if your gender was different?

Delphi woke up the next morning feeling rather groggy.

By the look of the early morning's light, and the sound of voices around the house, it was time to get up.

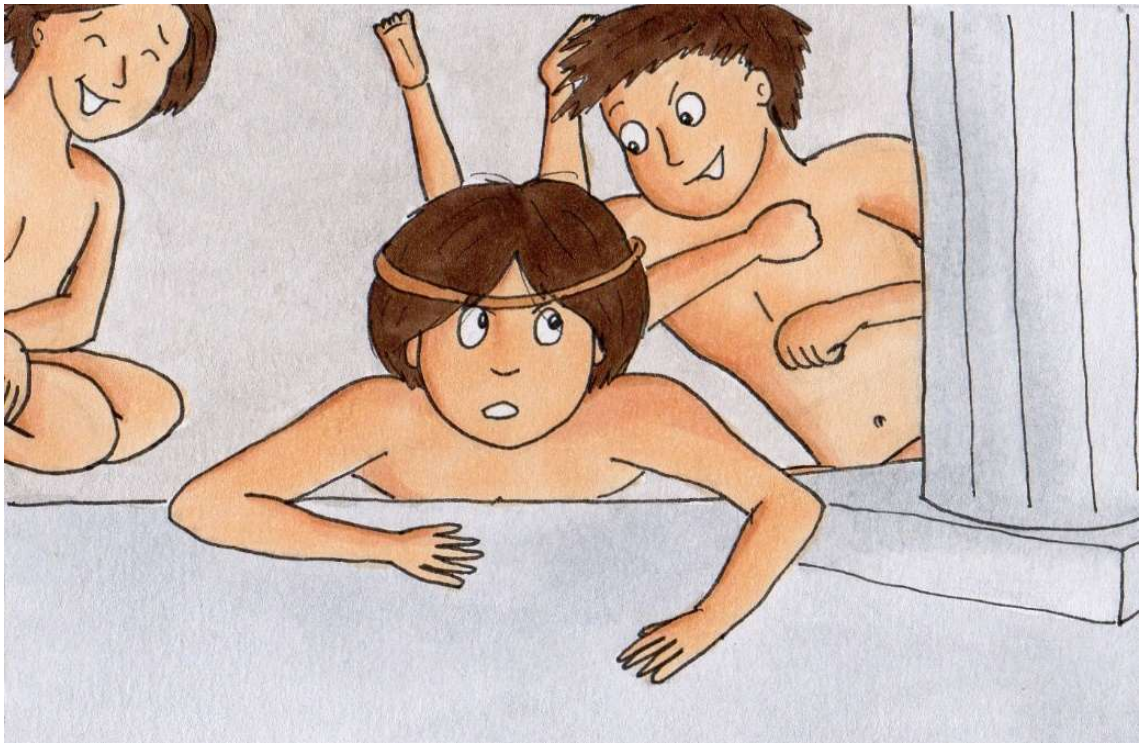
Delphi slowly stood up and stretched. He would have to be quick. He had school today.



After a quick breakfast of fruit and bread, he sat with his brothers in the courtyard. His father's slave taught them about how to find the area of circular shapes and how to find the length of sides of triangles. As usual, it was enormously boring and the teacher had kept telling him off. He felt distracted, like he was forgetting something important.

Say it like this!
Lie-see-um

When they finished their lessons, Delphi walked out to the Lyceum, a gymnasium at the edge of the city, for wrestling practice. He usually looked forward to exercising with the other boys, but for some reason there was something about wrestling naked with them that felt a bit… weird. He didn't want to do it, but of course, he had little choice.



His brothers and the other boys took great delight in pounding him into the dirt, time and time again, until he felt like he was one large bruise. When he complained, he got a smack round the hand for complaining.

All of this was a normal enough day for a boy in Athens. But it just didn't feel right.

For some reason, all he wanted to do was sneak off to be by himself, or perhaps even just do some chores around the house. But then he was due to go to another lesson, about public speaking and the law courts, and after that he was expected to eat with his father, who would be checking what he had learned from his lessons that day.

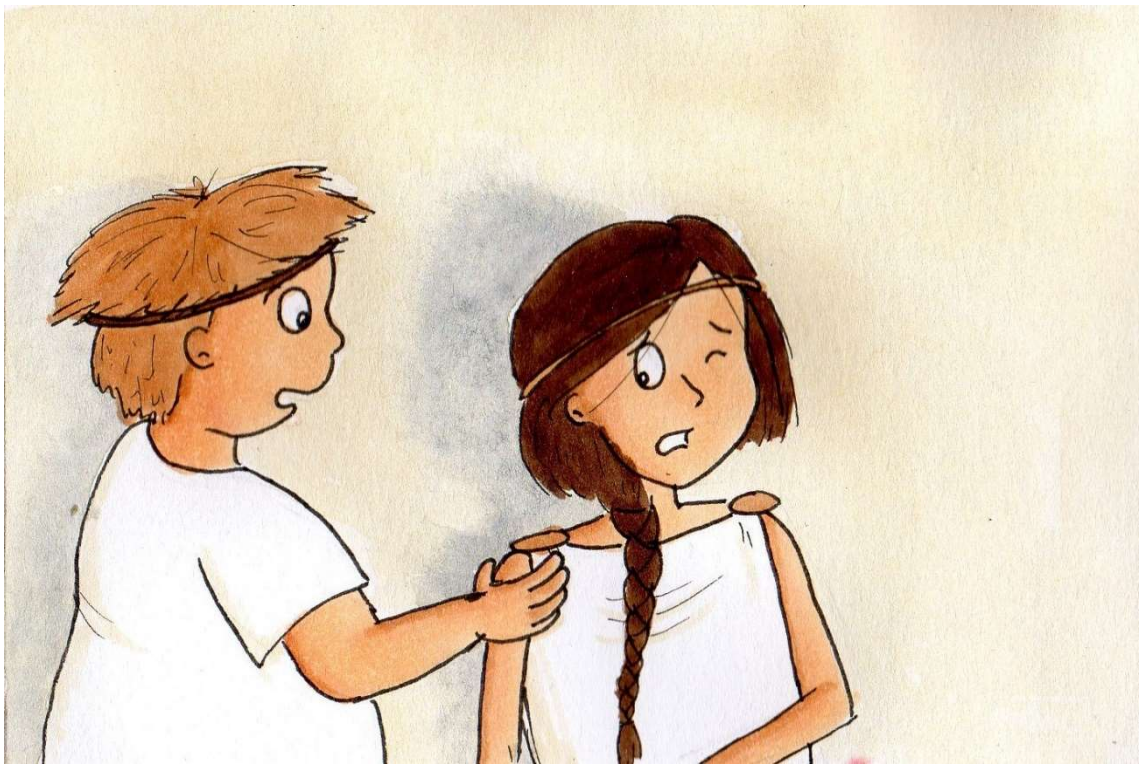
He found himself wondering what his friend Plato was up to. She would be having a much more interesting time. She could stay at home, all day if she wanted, with no-one to bother her. She didn't have to do wrestling or long maths lessons. She wasn't supposed to sneak out of course, but she often did.

He sometimes wondered if it was a better life. Being a girl. Delphi suspected he might prefer it.

It was that thought that made him run to the Agora to see if he could find her.

Sure enough, there she was, in the shade behind a building near the Water Clock, slumped in the dust, half asleep, and with a strange, copper mirror in her hand.

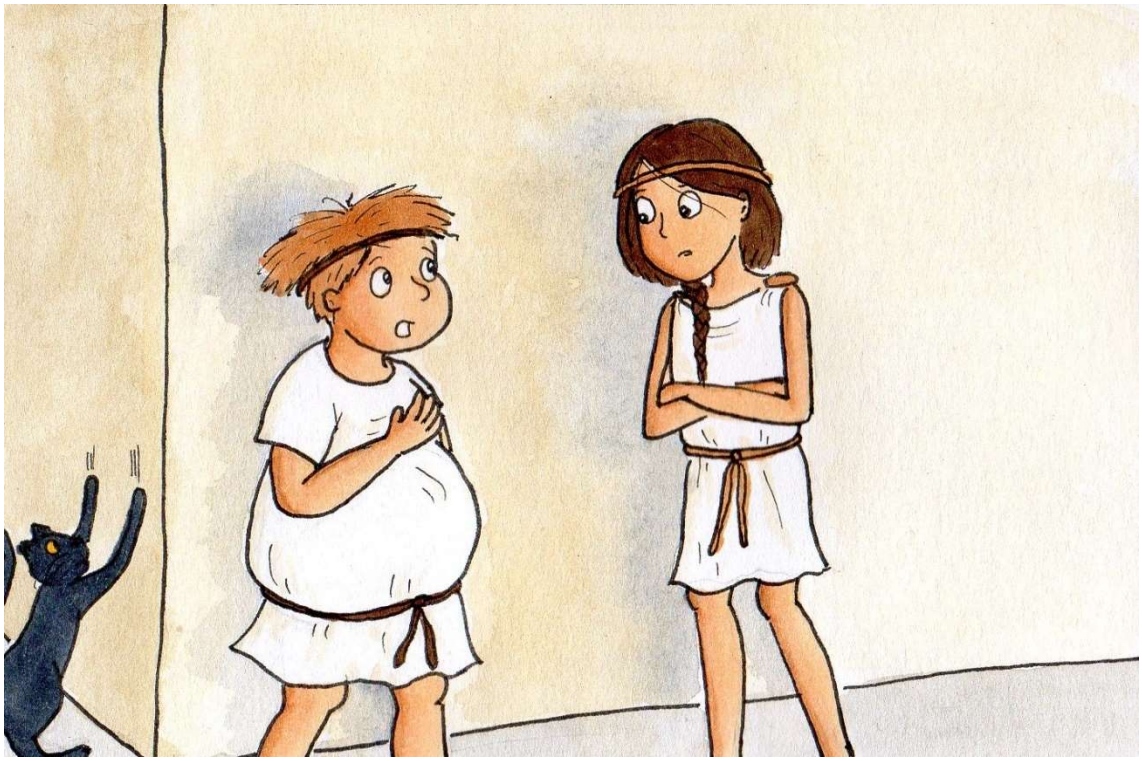
“Wake up!”



Delphi stirred and blinked furiously. She looked up at Plato.

“This isn’t a good place to fall asleep, Delphi!” Plato insisted, pulling her up. “Anyway, I was telling you what I think,” he added, looking a little hurt.

“Oh yeah… sorry,” Delphi mumbled. “What did you say?”



“I said, I’m not sure whether it makes that much difference whether you’re a boy or a girl. Maybe you’re still the same person inside, you know?” He placed his hand on his chest.

Delphi nodded. “I think you might be right.” She yawned. It had been a long day.

She started to brace herself to run out the Agora again without being caught, when a thought struck her.

“Plato?”

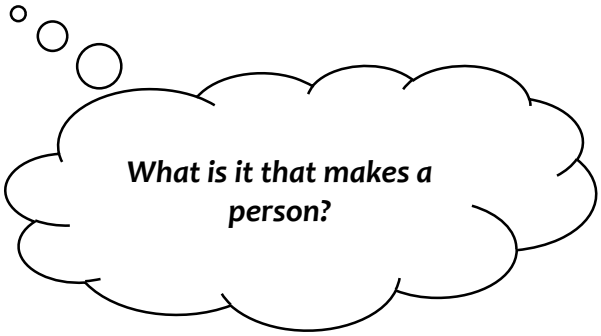
“Yeah?” He looked back at her.

“If it’s not what your name is, or what you look like, or whether you’re a boy or a girl, then… what is it? What is it that makes me, me?”

Delphi found herself really wanting Plato to say something to reassure her, to wash away the doubt. But he could only shrug.

They counted to three, and then ran for it.

The copper mirror stayed in the dust, until the paw of a yellow-eyed cat stepped on it, who was watching them go.



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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.