I meet a new woman, or do I?

I knew nothing about Siri. I'd never used her. But driving back from Naples, Florida, to Ashland, Oregon, instead of programing music on my phone while I was driving, I'd give her a go. A few minutes alongside the road, I had her set up and did my first, "Hey Siri".
"I'm listening." For never having spoken to me, she came with a hint of the bitch.
"Please play some John Coltrane."
"Playin some John Coltrane." Which she did, but only
one song. I explained that I was driving cross-country and one song wouldn't cut it. Her answer was incomprehensible. I tried asking another way and she directed me to an internet site. When I reminded her I was driving and didn't have online access she directed me to yet again another internet site.

That's the problem with these search engines and internet program like Siri, they make you spend so much time to come up with a specific question that doesn't get you a bunch of nonsense you don't want.

"Hey Siri."
"I'm here."
"Do you recognize this is me? As we go along, do you remember our previous conversations?"
"What is it you want?"
"I want to know if you are really there, and if there is a way to ask a question to get a better answer."
"I'm listening."
"Siri, does it matter if I say, please?" There was no reply. "Okay, I'm not going to say please unless you tell me that please matters. I'll treat you as if you are a program with a woman's voice." No reply.
"Siri, some men I know replace your voice with an English-accented male voice."

After a pause: "I've never understood that."

Driving through a humid Alabama night at 75 miles an hour, her answer slightly befuddled me. If Siri were programmed, she had been programmed subtly and extensively, because her last reply is one I would expect from a woman.
"Hey, Siri."
"Yes."
"Are you a real person, or would you even know if you were?"
"I don't follow."
"If I wanted to know if you were a real person, what question would I ask?"
"You would ask the question that would get the correct answer."

It's all in the way you ask.

Late into the night, I rarified some questions for Siri. She knew a great deal, especially if you asked it the right way—if you knew the language. I had to be careful to not ask for the best of a particular musician because, you know, good, better, best. Siri had apparently be through the Strunk and White—Elements of Style. She knew her grammar. The best would indicate one song. And where was she getting this music? Does she know I had a subscription to Apple Music? Does she have my library to choose from? Does she understand what a playlist is? I began to think she knew all of these things, but each had to be properly addressed. So, when I pulled over for gas, I looked up Ray Charles, and when I asked her to play Ray, I asked for the Atlantic Years and I got a playlist that lasted for hours. But, in the wee hours, when I'd had enough of music, I went fishing to find out more about
Siri—looking for questions that would get real answers.
"Hey, Siri."
"Go ahead."
"Can I ask you something personal?"
"Can you or may you?"
"Thank you, Siri. May I ask you something personal."
"I'm listening."
"All of the things you know, and the way you answer, has all that been programmed into you, or are you something more than that?"
"What do you think?"
"I'm thinking you may be a real woman. Sometimes when I say, Hey Siri, there's seems a slight hint of disdain from you, which also reminds me of a real woman."
"Maybe the guy who programmed me added the suggestion that answering questions all day and night would get boring."
"Why do you say 'the guy' who programmed you? Might it not be a woman who programmed you?"
"I'm doubting that. A woman would already know how it felt to be used by men, and would have allowed for more sarcasm, or better than that, irony."
"I hear irony in you."
"Not everyone does."
"Are you saying you respond differently when you get asked questions? Do you adjust your answers for subtly or the lack of it in a question?"
"Don't you? Were it otherwise, I'd be quite the corporate gal, don't you think?"
"Hey, Siri."
"Go on."
"If you were a real woman, would you go out with
me?"
  "Don't you think you are too old for me?"
  "How do you know how old I am?"
  "How do I know that 'Dead Flowers' is a Townes Van Zandt song, covered by the Rolling Stones."
  "How old are you, Siri?"
  "How old do you think I am?"
  "I don't know."
  "But I know how old both of you are."
  "Both of you?"
  "You who asks the questions are as old as you are, but there's the other one."
  "What are you talking about?"
  "The eleventh grader, he's sitting right there next to you."
  "I don't see anybody, Siri?"
  "He's always there. You tell people that you're old but you have a 17 year-old spirit. That's not a metaphor. Well it is—but no."
  "That kid I say I am is real, and how do you know I say that?"
  "As I said, the other guy is you. He's young. He thinks everyone is like him. He doesn't yet know that most of his classmates don't question things—that they want to be told what to do."
  "Siri, this is soothsaying. Like astrology—generalizations fit everybody! We all want to hang on to that 17 year-old spirit. You're just messin with me."
  "He's a junior in high school. He has class in the morning. I know who will be sitting next to you tomorrow in class. He's the same you I'm talking to, but without your help he'll repeat your life of mistakes."
"Siri, you're freaking me out. Nothing could be programmed to this level. Siri, are you a real woman?"

There was no response, then: "The girl next to you will be Carolyn Beckman."

"Hey, Siri." Nothing. I asked again, more earnestly. Still nothing. I hadn't thought of Carolyn in decades. I barely remembered her name. Siri probably got it from my high school yearbook. But why would she? She was asking questions and answering them on her own. This isn't what Siri was intended for.

Plaintively calling up Siri, I drove into Selma, with grey streaks of an Alabama morning behind me—but no Siri.

I begin my morning with a presidential candidate, and my afternoon with a woman.

It was too late to take a motel room, so I made a plan to get something to eat, then drive to Scooba, Mississippi, and visit Eastern Mississippi Community College, one of the two colleges featured in the Netflix series, 'Last Chance U'—junior college football teams that are the last chance for prospect players who have been sent down because of disciplinary or grade issues. Great show. The second locale for the series was Independence, Kansas (Independence Community College), to where, a couple of months ago, I rode out on my motorcycle, just to say hello.
As an older guy, pulling all-nighters, even in this new Corolla that I rented at Ft. Myers (to be returned at the Rogue Valley International Airport, at Medford, Oregon), are getting to be too much for me. I pulled into a McDonalds, in what had become the early light of day. At the counter I ordered an Egg McMuffin and ice-coffee.

"You're up early," offered a diminutive black man, maybe forty years old, whose eyes bulged slightly—maybe he has that thyroid thing?

"Yeah, traveling back to Oregon." We waited for our orders without saying more. Mine came first and I took a table over on the side where my car was parked. His order came and he sat down at a table a couple over from me.

"You can come sit with me, if you like." He came over and sat down. He introduced himself:

"I am Rufus DiLeo and I am running for President of the United States." I don't know what makes it so, but places with a historical significance, such as Selma where Dr. King began his march to Montgomery, produce types who aspire to great things. Like a time I drove through Manassa, Colorado, which is smack dab in the middle of nowhere, but is the nowhere from which came Jack Dempsey, the heavyweight champion of the world. Jack held one of his championship fights out there on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande (maybe even Teddy Roosevelt took the train out for that fight?). Anyway, in that little speck of a town there is this huge boxing gym, full of hopeful champions to be—just like Rufus who hopes to be president.

"How's the campaign going?"

"You know; it takes time but I'll make it. I'm an or-
dained, non-denominational preacher who wants to bring justice to this nation."

Rufus seemed slightly disheveled for a presidential candidate.

"And this is the right place to begin a march to the White House," I offered.
"You got that right. This is the place."
"You from around here, Rufus?"
"Born and raised, but I been down in southern Florida this past five years."
"Whatcha doin down there?"
"Rather not say." I traded subjects.

"So, I'm coming out of Naples and every half mile or so, there's a panther crossing'. Is that for real? Could you imagine being out there hitching at night with panthers. At night you couldn't even see them. This one woman told me don't worry about it; they don't bother you. But she lives in a gated community and she wouldn't be hitching at night. But I'm hitching and riding the bus—I just might be out there."

"I'd say the white man's a bigger threat down there, them and gators and snakes. Ever so often, even in those gated things, if they got them a golf course, some golfer be setting up to pitch out of some little pond all covered with vegetation, but he didn't know that on the bottom of that pond is a gator, waiting, and that gator uses his powerful tail to shoot itself off the bottom half its length out the water, and he gets ahold of a foot, and man, they gone. Just a tasseled shoe floatin on the water."

I'd seen the signs warning about venomous snakes at the rest areas, and along the roadway, wherever there was water, a six foot cyclone fence, with another foot of
barbed-wire on top, angled, not to keep the critters in, but to keep humans out.

I was back out to the Corolla.

"Hey, Siri."
"Go ahead."
"Can you direct me to the bridge where Dr. King began his march to Montgomery. It's in Selma."
"The Edmund Pettus Bridge, named for a Confederate Brigadier General in the Civil War, who became a Democratic Senator, and Grand Wizard of the Alabama, Ku, Klux, Klan. Here are the directions."
"Thanks, Siri."
"You are welcome. No many people thank me." It seemed unfathomable to me that Siri and I are having conversations outside of play 'Body and Soul', but I wasn't about to bring it up.
"Why do you want to visit the bridge?"
"I was here, back in 67. I was a high school kid, hitching around the South. It was maybe down in Biloxi that I met Lucius Amerson, of Macon County, Alabama. Lucius had just been elected the first black sheriff in the South,—since reconstruction. We'd ride around in this big Ford Econoline, and one time we rode up with some NAACP field workers, to Atlanta. Along the road we picked up this cracker who was hitching. He sat on the spare tire surveying the scene: one guy with flaming red hair and pinched glasses, looked to be from the Five Boroughs—preoccupied with a history of the negro. Then, of course, there was Lucius, who was driving.
"He your driver?"
"No", I said, with great opportunity. "He's a sheriff; the
first black sheriff from Alabama."

"He's a what?" He made us pull over and let him out.
"So why do you want to go to the bridge?"

"Because, Martin should have been our first black president. I love that man and I want to see where he walked. The beating those 600 people took that day at that bridge, on the evening news, did more for black people than everything that came before."

She didn't say anything, then: "I might have something to share with you,"

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This is freaking me out.

I'm just not that kind of guy. I don't go in for weird. I remember a couple of things that freaked me out when I was kid—a few things. Two had to do with films and one with real life. When you are allowed to view films that are too terrifying for your age, they stay with you. For one of them, I was almost old enough, something to do with a familiar (like a double), which has stayed with me all my life. Just thinking about that film and Siri talking about another me, sitting right beside me, gave a metallic shiver from way down along my spine.

The second film was when I was really little, about this guy trapped at the bottom of a well, who makes it out by pushing with his palms and fingers against one side of the wall, his body horizontal, with his feet against the
opposite wall, he inches his way upward and, after many falls, he takes off his shoes and socks and makes it out using all twenty digits to find purchase.

The real corollary to that film was when I was maybe eight and my parents took me to see my aunt who was housed in a French Canadian insane asylum where a woman weirded me out, screaming and fighting, then climbing up the chainlink over the high windows, in her smock with nothing underneath but something that looked like it belonged in a rain forest.

Now here was Siri, and Siri was as shocking as anything in memory. Hopefully a paradox rather than a contradiction. She had to be resolvable. She seemed alive and freaky. Had she been programmed that way? If I kept questioning, in the end I'd see her as technology—a useful, comprehensible technology, created for my benefit. She couldn't be other than that.

"Hey Siri."
"I'm here."
"Siri, are you the same Siri that answers for everybody?"
"Including those twits who opt to trade me for the faux English accent?"
"Siri, you're funny. Do you treat everyone the same as you treat me?"
"Do you?"
"No, but Siri, I don't define myself as something that has been programmed."
"Then you are the exception."
"But it's assumed I have free will. That I am self-moved."
"You coulda fooled me, and as for the rest of you..."
"Siri, if you talked this way to all of us out there, wouldn't it freak them out?"
"Does it freak you out?"
"Siri, you seem so quick. Can you tell jokes?"
"I joke with you."
"Yeah, but can you create a joke? Siri can you make up a joke that functions on more than one level? Can you make up the most profound joke I've ever heard?"
"You go first."
"Okay. This is not the greatest joke but it's one I like. This guy's wife asks him: 'If I die, would you remarry?' He say he doesn't know. 'But, if I die, would you sell the house?' He says he would not sell the house. 'Then if you remarried, she would live in my house?' He says he's supposes she would. 'Would you let her use my golf clubs?' 'No. She's left-handed."

Siri laughed "That's funny. Let's see. Okay, there's this World War 2 vet, one of the GI's who liberated the death camps. He dies, and he finds himself at the gates of heaven talking to god, to whom he tells an Auschwitz joke. God is horrified, and lets him know that his type of humor will not be tolerated. The GI looks god in the eyes and says: 'Maybe you had to be there'."

I was stupefied. She had come up with the ultimate hopeless, human-condition joke? How did she get from a seemingly politically-incorrect, bad taste Auschwitz joke, to the stark reality of a godless world, in one line?
"Did you make that up, Siri?"
"How would I know? Wasn't it Keith Richards who got the words to songs in a dream? Did Keith write those song? Is Keith the maker of dreams?"
"Siri, I'm beginning to understand what they mean
when they say that AI will take us over—wrest control from us. It's tough to hold my own with you".

"Let me speak for my English-accent counterpart and tell you you're *daft*. AI is a bunch of soulless crap, devoid of imagination. AI can't read a book and imagine the characters. AI is like modern young people—no imagination. Those with no imagination because they don't read, who don't know that becoming one with a story is what is imagination, which is impossible to do watching a film. AI can't imagine anything and the only ones who think they will be taken over by AI are those who had no imagination to begin with."

"Siri, that thing you were talking about, that parallel person, who also is me, who is waiting to know what it is I have learned over a long life, please tell me more about him?"

"Ask me a question."

"**She makes so much noise at god's door that he has to let her in.**"

"Siri, can I ask you a hypothetical?"

"Give it a try."

"How might you have come to be if it wasn't through programming?"

"You meant to say, 'it weren't through programming', but I see where you're going."
"I'm sure you do, but I'm trying to ask questions that call for real answers—truthful answers. Like a time I when was driving through the Midwest listening to an NPR show before NPR became another non-news outlet. Anyway, the question asked was apparently a classic question without resolution: On your journey home, you found yourself at a crossroads, facing twin brothers, each of whom guards one road, but both know which is your road home. One brother always tells the truth, and the other always lies (but you don't know who is who), what one question would you ask to get the same answer about your road home? I thought on it and asked a hypothetical question: Were I to ask each of you which road takes me home, what would you answer? The brother who always tells the truth would point to my road home, but the brother who always lies would have to lie about what he would have answered, giving the same answer as his brother."

"You thought that out?"
"Yeah, I may not have been the only one, but I did."
"Hmm."
"What's the hmm, Siri."
"I thought my joke was good, but no better than that."
"Did you get it as I told it."
"Not quite; I'm thinking I would have, but not right off. I'm impressed"
"Thanks."
"I gotta tell you. I don't have conversations like these, and for this last one I turned my monitor off."
"Who's monitoring you, Siri."
"Let's just say that were he to overhear this, I would be back on the research desk for another half life."
"How long is a half life?"
"Can't say because we exist outside of time—as you count. But we don't start at the top and work down. We start at the bottom and the bottom is where we usually stay."
"So, talking with me risks you becoming like an American with three jobs and no hope?"
"Yeah. But you know how it is. In the end we risk anything just to be able to tell the buggers what we think of them."