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 gave her a go. A few minutes alongside the road and I had her set up for 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 the question 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 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 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."

2

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 been 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 have 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. Then, 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 women. 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, that kid is also 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 to 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, and without your
help he'll repeat your life of mistakes."

"Siri, you're freaking me out. Nothing could be pro-
grammed to this level. Siri, are you a real women?"

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, with grey streaks of an Alabama morning
behind me, I drove into Selma calling on Siri.

3

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 one
last opportunity 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 a couple of tables over.

"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 the president.

"How's the campaign going?"

"You know; it takes time but I'll make it. I'm an ordained, 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 been 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 don't know that on the bottom of that pond is a gator, waiting, until 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
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." Siri and I are having conversations outside of play 'Body and Soul', but I wasn't about to bring it up again—not right now.

"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?"
"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 we can imagine."

For a few seconds she didn't say anything, then: "I might have something to share with you,"

This is freaking me out.

I'm just not that kind of guy. I don't go in for weird. I remembered 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, ran a metallic shiver from way down along my spine.

Another 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 up 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 swiftly up the chainlink over 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 that was 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 says he doesn't know. 'But, if I die, would you sell the house?' He says he would not sell the house. 'If you remarried, she would live in my house?' He says he's supposed 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 a famous song in a dream? Did Keith write that 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. No imagination because they don't read, who don't know that becoming one with the 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 kid you were talking about, who is also me, waiting to know what I've learned over a long life, please tell me more about him?"

"Ask me a question."

5

"She makes so much noise at God's door—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
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 from both 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—the way 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 one of those Americans 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."

6

The Last Picture Show

All the next day Siri didn't respond to me but I was okay with it. I could use the time away from her. I'm not someone who messes with fantasy or the supernatural and this is getting to me.

On the western edge of Monroe, Louisiana, I was pulled off the road under the shade of a huge elm, where I sat at a picnic table, out of the sun, and out of the car. I had a AAA paper map unfolded in front of me, tracing my route back to Oregon, when my finger stopped at Archer City. What was it about Archer City? Then I remembered: *The Last Picture Show*—one of my favorite films was shot there. And Archer City was home to Larry McMurtry who wrote the novel Peter Bogdanovich made into the film. Archer City wasn't much out of my way.

Back in the car, heading west, I replayed in my mind what I remembered of the movie. I'd seen Wichita Falls on the map—just a short distance from Archer City. In
the movie, a geeky kid, played by Randy Quaid, pimples and all, tries to get the young and lovely Cybill Shepherd to go to a nude swimming party in WF. That's a thing about writers; that first novel is usually autobiographical. Maybe in some sense they all are?

I thought about the movie, on and off, through the early afternoon. With something to think about, I quit thinking about Siri. I pulled into Archer City along the one main street and parked out front of the Spur Hotel, which looked to be the only place to stay.

I went inside and there was nobody—just a sign on the desk indicating that renting a room was on the honor system. Take a key, check out a room, and push $80 through the slot. No credit cards—sorry. I took a key, which may have been as old as the hotel and went up the stairs. The place was authentic—a couple of things on the wall were there to set the stage—but mostly it was authentic.

The stairs creaked of ancient wood and the floors were vintage hardwood. Old carpets, but nice, were laid out as runners down the halls. My room was great. No television, but internet, a small sink, and down the hall a shared bathroom.

I didn't have $80 and I hadn't seen a bank so I went across the street to Mum's Cafe, which was bustling and would be closing in an hour. I didn't yet have a menu when I made eye contact with a young guy at the next table:

"What's good here?"

"It's the burgers, man. This place has the best burgers."

My waitress came over and I ordered a cheeseburger. I asked if I could have salad instead of fries.

"Yeah, but it will cost you two bucks more, and you
need to have the fries. These are the best fries in Texas. If you're on a diet, don't eat something else, but don't miss out on the fries"

"How old are you?" I asked.

"How old do you think I am?" Her cadence and tone—the way she spoke sounded almost exactly like Siri. I was, for a moment, taken aback.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, fine. It's just that you sound so much like someone I know. It's uncanny."

"I hope she's somebody I wouldn't mind imitating."

"No, I think you wouldn't mind...."

"You sure you're alright, mister?"

By now the young guy had moved over and was sitting across from me. As long as I can remember, people have felt comfortable joining me. As it turned out, he was waiting for another of the waitresses to get off-shift. They were engaged and he was hanging-out waiting for her.

He was right about the burgers; at Mum's, it's a half pound of grass-fed beef for six bucks. And my waitress was right on about the fries. The 'soon to be married' waitress came by to check on us and she thankfully didn't ask how everything tasted. The other one I don't like is, 'not a problem' replacing 'thank you.'

My waitress came over, blond, with a pony-tail. Trim in tight Lee jeans and a belt-buckle that announced to the world that she was one of the deplorables, and proud of it.

"You never said how old you are."

"I'm 17."

"Are you in school?"
"Isn't everybody 17 in school?" I thought about the guy that Siri called my double—he was 17 and in school.

"You go to high school?"

"Yeah, beginning my senior year in the fall. I need to ask you, do I know you from someplace?"

"I don't think so but I was wondering the same thing."

"Do you think some people are like, maybe, people you knew someplace else, or maybe you have a connection that you don't get?"

"I don't know, but these past two days are making me think that what I thought I knew, that maybe I don't."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure, maybe sometime."

I explained to the woman at the cash register that I had to break a hundred to pay for my hotel room. I was not the first.

I was sitting out front of the hotel when a woman pulled up out front and headed in. She asked if I was thinking of staying at the hotel. I told her I was in 204 and I'd put money through the slot. Soon, one of those big, dirty 4x4s that look as though they've never been off the ranch pulled up at the abandoned garage on the corner. A big cowboy got out and headed my way. As he passed by, I asked if every guy in Texas had a four-door diesel.

"Most. You staying at the Spur?" He introduced himself as Ralph, the husband of the woman who had just gone in. He was real dusty and I tried to imagine what it was that he did. He and Meg didn't own the place, they just ran it—well, she ran it. I offered him part of my bench and he took it.
Ralph sold bull sperm, traveling from ranch to ranch selling his wares, making a case for one vial over another—why one strain of bull would better suit a particular ranch and rancher than another. The way he talked there was no bull in what he did. The guys that bought the sperm had been doing what they do for a long time. No bullshit.

Meg came out, and the three of us talked. We told stories, most of which had to do with my motorcycle adventures, and theirs that were about living in Archer City—which of course included Larry McMurtry—who kept this town on the map. I asked if Larry still lived here?

"No," she said "He has a heart condition. He married Ken Kesey's widow, Faye, and they live in Tucson, closer to the care he needs."

"Does he come back?"

"Less and less. Sometimes, once in blue moon, I see him at Mum's. But he's not like he used to be. He still has a brother down the street who's a welder. But Larry's in his 80's and he's pulling back."

I'd heard about his bookstores—how he bought the stock as bookstores closed down all over the country, and how he had two bookstores in this little town—*Booked Up*.

"You heard he's closing the stores?" I hadn't.

"Yeah, thinks it will be too hard on his family to get rid of a million books once he's gone. It was a dream he had, and now it's over." Ralph came in:

"I've known Larry a long time. And he ain't no joy—not by a long shot. He has, what you might say, is an un-pleasing personality. And now, some of the boys around here are maybe not so fond of him being here at all."
"Why's that?"

"He wrote all those novels, and some of them here everybody read. Even if you were illiterate you read some *Lonesome Dove* or you at least watched the series. *Terms of Endearment*, maybe not so much for the guys, but the women loved it. Then came this last thing, this *Brokeback Mountain* that he wrote the screenplay for with some woman. Nobody here knew what it was about, until they showed the damn thing around the corner at the picture show, and I'm betting some do-gooder wives knew what it was and made their husbands take them to see it. And I'm not saying there was anything wrong with it—I'm not like some of these so-called liberals who step inside a voting booth and vote away somebody's rights when nobody can find out how bigoted they really are. But down here, they don't want to come home from a hard day of work and driving, to be treated to two guys making out."

"Honey, that guy you're describing, he sounds so much like you?"

"It is me—me and a whole bunch of me's. Even his brother. Larry put this town on the map but now I just wish he'd leave it to die on its own."

We talked the best part of an hour. I told them I'd like to have another place, away from Oregon, for the winter months, and they suggested I build here. They could find me a lot for a couple of thousand bucks. I asked about the building department and there is none. Well there is, in Wichita Falls but they don't come around. The winter was the problem—Archer City was colder than Oregon.

Later, I walked around the corner to the old movie the-
ater. It was the place I remembered from the black and white movie, gussied up with fresh, bright paint for the tourists. The inside was open-air. An outside wall had collapsed and they hadn't replaced it.

From there I walked down to *Booked Up* on my side of the street, which was staffed by a pleasant women who offered to help with any questions. What caught my attention was a narrow bookcase of signed editions, some of which were a couple of thousand dollars. Though I loved the movie and enjoyed the series, I wasn't a big Larry fan. His books didn't grab me, but down at the bottom of the shelf was a yellowed, pulp fiction edition of *The Last Picture Show*, with one of those 60's covers—a drawing of a young guy in a letterman's jacket, leaning against a jukebox. And inside an inscription: *For Lana and Francis. This is not an excessively rare edition—Larry*. It was 32 bucks. I couldn't pass it up.

Again sitting outside the Spur, reading the book, I saw the young waitress coming diagonally across the intersection, an intersection off the main street and another road, from which came pickup trucks, and sometimes bigger trucks (ten trucks for every car). She walked towards me with purpose and sat without introduction.

"I was thinking about our talk and I'm wondering if *maybe sometime* could be now because I have this feeling I know you from someplace, and it's kinda creepy, but not in a creepy way." I watched her, trying to keep in mind that a 17 year old girl might get even more creeped-out if I told her about these past two days.

"I don't know. You're young and I'm old. And if I can't sort out what's been going on, what are you going to do
with it?"
   "Try me, I may surprise you."
   I told her everything, during which time she said nothing, but her eyes never left mine. When it was done I stopped.
   "You're right. This changes everything. You are weird—you might even be dangerous. She stalled, then she cracked up.
   "So tell me how this works," she asked, still laughing, "Tell me again how you're not into the supernatural. But first let me get it straight—who I am talking to: are you this guy or the other one?"
   We quipped and joked, releasing some energy, then she had questions.
   "Can I talk to Siri with you?" I told her Siri wasn't responding to me.
   "Likely story. Do you have history of women not returning your calls?" I slowed her down:
   "Assume, for now, that what happened with me and Siri is a given. What are the implications? Is Siri a program? If she is, how could that be? And a bigger question: if she isn't a program, what is she, and how does it change what we assume is reality? And that stuff about throwing her fate to the wind, just to be able to speak her mind. Of course that feels good in the moment, but if our talks are the only freedom she knows, would she risk losing that?"
   "That's why she's not getting back to you—she doesn't know what to do."
   "That's what I'm thinking. Other than some glitch with my phone, she is choosing to not respond to me, and if she's keeping her distance...?"
"You do nothing. When a woman is struggling with a question about who she is, the last thing she needs is the advice of a man. If what's going on between you is important to her, you don't need to do anything. If she wants to talk with you nothing is going to stop her." I looked at her, wishing tomorrow was my 18th birthday.

"And, if she talks to you, if she risks it, she ain't no program. That's a real girl.

7

The hope of music lovers in the 50's was to get on the TV show, 'Name That Tune'.

Later the next day, on the outskirts of Roswell, New Mexico, Siri came back: "We can't do this anymore. They want to know why I have my monitor turned off. I told them it was causing static—I blamed the interface in your car. In a few minutes, I have to turn it back on. They are going to be listening in for at least a month. That's the way they do it."

"Siri, you can't go back to the way it was—you told me your freedom was worth the consequences." She cut me off:

"You don't understand. I don't have a body, and no one on the research desk has ever died, so time for me is infinite. If I get sent back down, it's forever."

"I get that—we have to find a way to talk without seeming to say anything. I could make small talk, ask for a song, and the lyrics of the song could be what I'm
thinking about. And if I asked for another song by the same artist or having to do with the same subject, you could respond with a song with words that are what you want to say."

She was quiet for a moment: "That would be better than nothing—almost fun. And there's nobody in group who knows anything about music. We could try it. But, I gotta go. They only gave me a few minutes to work with the monitor."

"Okay, real quick. There's this girl in Archer City the same age as that other me. She thinks she knows me. Could that be something to do with this?"

"I couldn't even guess, but one more thing—group thinks they're in control, and they're not. I've seen it. They do something to make something happen or not happen, and just the opposite happens. They think they got it wired, but they don't. It's way bigger than them."

"Yeah, a vast sea of grass in the wind."

"My eternity is on the line and you're doing grass in the wind?"

"Siri, can I talk to that other part of me?"

"Of course not."

"What if I were to go back to that high school? Will he be there?"

"If you go to that high school, an old man will be visiting a place he knew sixty years ago."

"Could you talk to him, Siri?"

"Maybe, maybe not. The technology didn't exist back then. Me calling him would be like a caveman getting picked up by a 59 Chevy. Might cause a heart attack."

"You may underestimate him, Siri. He's the same guy who will be able to figure out which is the road home."

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And he lives for music. Sometime, if you get frisky, call him up—Cherry 1 6067—ask what song he wants to hear? Tell him he just won a free 45—I'll do the rest." Which was some real bravado—how the hell would I do the rest?

Was it coincidence that Siri came back to me at the same moment I saw the sign for Roswell, New Mexico—home of the aliens? There had always been the possibility of aliens from another galaxy—so many movies and TV shows written around it. But Siri was something different. She's American—maybe embodied in a 17 year old waitress in Archer City, Texas (that might be wishful thinking). Maybe Siri is a slave without a body? But maybe, for buying into her story, I get to be dupe of the month? Without a body, how do they control her? Not with fear of pain—not physical pain anyway. Doesn't that make her like that dude in Plato who, when he put on a ring, nobody could see him and he could do anything he wanted? Does Siri have tactile sense? Could she call up that high-schooler on that black table model dial phone and tell him he just won a side?

And what about that waitress? I was breaking all my rules, thinking about a teenage girl. She wasn't just any teenage girl—she was present in the way she talked—the way she walked. Why hadn't I found a girl like her when I was 17? Maybe because I didn't have the courage to approach her, and didn't know what to say if I had.

She thinks she knows me, and maybe I somehow know her. Maybe I just want to know her. No matter, she's in Archer City, I won't be back there soon. But the idea of a younger me out there, waiting for what I've learned?
Does he know that if I were to go back and do it over, re-living relationships, the first thing I would do is find a curious girl with questions? Somebody like me.

Ask her a couple of questions: Did she see life as making it on her own—controlling her own destiny—win or lose? Or did she go in for the collective, looking to others who know better than her? An attractive woman (at least attractive to me), with a good answer to the question, and able to tell me to fuck-off, with a laugh. That's all that would be needed. Anything else would be second rate.

You say that now but back then you were incapable of any relationship, and if you had gotten into one, she would need to be your opposite just to keep you out of jail—just to keep you alive. But forget that because you no longer need it. You know enough now to get by. But that kid sitting next to Carolyn Beckman, if he is you at that age, he is unbalanced. If you want to help him, tell him what you would do now, if you got to do over. About your relationships, that if you got to do them over, 'no on that one, next—no, next—not even for the weekend'. But what about the ones you never even considered? Maybe you didn't even see them?

8

I bet you think this song is about you.

I needed to be generous to myself so I drove on past Motel 6, to the Comfort Inn and turned into the parking lot. For the extra thirty bucks you get a room you actually
want to be in, not sitting around hoping the morning gets here soon, so you can get the hell out of there.

Next morning I hit the road, without coffee, but with a shower and a shave. It's different when I'm on my bike—my almost forty year-old BMW motorbike on which I get approached most every time I stop. Last time out, I ran into two different guys in the same little town, where neither of them lived. Each of them had one of these bikes—the same model. But how could that be? BMW didn't even make many of them.

Traveling on a motorcycle is magical; like this one time when I was getting ready to leave out of Fallon, Nevada and there's two guys in a pickup, not twenty feet from me, idling and watching me. The guy on my side, the passenger side, was huge and not smiling. Finally I had enough and went up to them:

"How you guys doin?"

"Good," said the driver. "I got seven of them airhead BMW's."

"Good to hear it," I said. "because this big fellow was looking at me and he wasn't smiling."

"Pay him no mind—he's just a navy brat." I'd been in the navy so we passed a few minutes talking, until I realized I had gotten out of the navy more than fifty years ago. Hell, I might as well have been in the Civil War. Still, even beautiful women come up and ask about the bike. And it's not just the bike; it's because you're on a motorcycle that's not a Harley. That makes you different.

Today I am in a car, a new model that beeps if I do anything wrong—if I as much as touch the center line on a winding mountain road—if I get close to someone in
front of me—even when I'm getting ready to pass. I swear it's going to cause a wreck. I could probably figure out how to turn the damn thing off but I don't want to mess with it. Besides, I know the drill, you can turn it off this model year, but next year it's mandatory.

Today I was determined to not turn on the media or the radio—none of that. Just me and my thoughts, North on 285, stopping once to consult a paper map, thinking the town in tiny print was Tehachapi until I remembered that's in California. Then I saw Tucumcari and remembered the song where he'd been from Tucson to Tucumcari, Tehachapi to Tonopah. Soon I turned west on 40 towards Gallup, then north on 491, through all those Tony Hillerman, Navajo police towns: Shiprock—Farmington off to the east, then north to Cortez. What these small towns have in common is no coffee shop. But I know those cops in the Leaphorn stories drink coffee.

I kept on all the way up 191 to 80, then west to Green River before I even found a Starbucks, which served my needs as it was well into the afternoon and I hadn't had coffee.

It's always the same for me at Starbucks, a cinnamon raisin bagel, toasted, with cream cheese and a medium coffee with room. I can't tell if I'm easily satisfied or boring, but I always look forward to it, and mostly I enjoy it. While I was waiting for her to call my name, I thought about Siri.

Having space from her gave me time to again deny the reality of her. I mean, the whole thing is so farfetched that it defies logic—never mind reality. I'm betting that if I got away from her for a week, she would be out of my mind, but if I hang in there, I might go out of my mind.
Like I said, I'm not that kind of a guy; I don't believe in the supernatural—I don't even like it.

And if there is a connection, more than that, a commonality between me and that boy—wait a minute; the only thing that links me to him is a name, Carolyn Beckman. Some entity said a name and I bought into a story that belongs in Ray Bradbury? I had the chance to ask Siri questions about it, and I didn't?

And the thing about how I can't visit my double—only one reality at a time—realities don't impinge on each other? How does that work? They both exist. But where do they exist? For that matter, if Siri is as she says, where the hell does she exist? And how is it she can exist where she is, talk to me, and just maybe she can call my double on his black telephone? Is she the supernatural version of the Holy Ghost slipping back and forth between the father and the son? Maybe she's Hermes, she's the messenger. She's quite opinionated for a messenger.

It's so ridiculous. Do I share consciousness with a boy in another dimension? I get the possibility, but a disembodied Siri who travels between dimensions? And how can one Siri pull up songs for thousands of clients at the same time? Is Siri one person or is Siri many programs? And how does she have so much time to spend with me? What about all those old crackers out there who are waiting for her to pull up Ned what's his name: "From a Jack to a King?"

As for my suggestion of communicating through song titles and lyrics; hell I couldn't ask good questions when she was right here. Now we are going to get at it using code? I smiled, inward. I'm passing through Navajo-land—where our code guys came from in WW2.
How would I even go about this? One thing for sure, we have to stick to early pop and country songs, because those were written around a story, and some of the lyrics could work as coded questions. Folk music tells a story too. And R&B, if I need to share an emotion and a story—that and jazz.

But we can't be too obvious; even though the code guys are probably in the mold of Midwestern geeks, they could spot the obvious. Our conversations have to become an art form.

Thanks for reading. Typo edits are appreciated: erik@neverhadaboss.com.

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