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A secret everyone knows and forgets

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Today is the third anniversary of the moment that 27-year-old Matt Stoner figured out the secret of life. He nearly died in the process, managing by fate or miracle to survive, only to discover that most people don't believe that he knows the answer to life's mystery. But he does. And so do I. The two of us figured it out on the very same day, Dec. 19, though for me it happened two years earlier.



"It was only a few seconds," Matt says. "But when something that dramatic happens to you, things that weren't clear to you before suddenly become clear. At least it was for me. And I don't think that feeling will ever go away."

Actually, it will. I know this for a fact, as do most people who've lived past their 20s. But that is getting ahead of our story, which begins on a chilly Sunday morning in December 1999, when Matt, then a graduate student at the University of Arizona, headed north for a visit to his family in Phoenix.

"I remember at the time being all caught up in the politics of academia and self-absorbed with studies and such," he says. "It's one of those silly cliches that is true. Your life is going along beautifully and you're too distracted by petty things to notice it. You just cruise along, unaware." Which is what he was doing that morning as he traveled north on the interstate in his Ford Explorer.

"I started to feel this weird vibration," he says, "and the car was all over the road."

This was nearly a year before the entire country became aware of the problems with Firestone tires that were installed on Explorers.

"Before I knew it, one of the tires essentially came apart and I did a couple of 360s across several lanes of traffic," Matt says. "I was lucky it was a Sunday morning."

His truck took out a highway exit sign, tilted into an irrigation ditch, flipped and rolled.

"I was wearing my seat belt, which saved me," he says. "And it was amazing to see how six or seven cars, just about everyone who was behind me on the road, pulled over to help."

Matt's injuries were minor.

"While I was OK, everything was different," he says. "Your view of what's important changes after something like that. You begin to appreciate the gift that every day is. You see how the most valuable thing you can give someone is your time. You get your priorities right, I suppose."

But it doesn't last. Sooner or later, each of us faces a crisis, a harrowing event, a near disaster, an actual disaster. It changes us for a while. Then we go back. Dashiell Hammett described it this way: "He adjusted himself to beams falling and then no more fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling." We learn the secret of life, then forget it. And must learn it again. For me, the most recent time was five years ago, when I spent most of December visiting a small hospital in western Pennsylvania. I'd arrive with my father before dawn and stay with him in the room my mother occupied for as long as the nurses allowed. My mother by then was as thin as a child's drawing, as hollow as a figurine made from cornstalks, a fallen leaf, susceptible to the slightest breeze. Outside the hospital, the winter wind howled. Through long days that became long weeks, she spoke of the future, of cleaning her house and cooking meals and hugging her grandchildren. Until she was quieted by pain and drugs, then fell into a more permanent silence. It was Dec. 19. We all have such days, sharing them separately. They're not marked on calendars, like Christmas, but have the same power, at least until we adjust to the beams *not* falling and need another reminder.

This is the third year Matt Stoner has taken special notice of today's date. Perhaps it's the first time for someone else. The 10th for another. For me, today is the fifth anniversary of the moment that I figured out the secret of life.

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