

# And Then There Was One

Category: Loss

written by Anthony Papagiannis | July 13, 2025

There were three of us in the same high school class who chose to study medicine. We passed our admission exams together, and celebrated the fact with a hearty meal and a generous libation of red wine, a once-in-a-lifetime event. We were already making plans for future specialties and career prospects.

Then one of the three collapsed suddenly at home and died of a previously undetected heart problem. That was in the twentieth year of our lives, the third of our studies. Our trio became a duet.

The two of us completed the medical course successfully, and followed our separate ways. I went into pulmonology, he chose psychiatry. Our friendship stood the test of time. I had the grim privilege to care for his father in his terminal illness, but also the joy of seeing his children grow up and prosper.

Late last year, he asked me whether I could see him for a spirometry. Which puzzled me; I never knew him to have respiratory problems. As soon as he entered my office he said simply, "I've got ALS." It took me two seconds to translate the initials into a dreaded diagnosis, all the worse as it involved my lifelong friend.

Over the months that followed his breathing gradually declined, in parallel with his increasing limb weakness and atrophy. He faced the challenge of the incurable, inexorable disease with spiritual fortitude and courage, making all the necessary arrangements for the coming end. He declined suggestions for respiratory support and parenteral nutrition, opting for palliation only. He chose a suitable care home for himself and his disabled wife of fifty years. During our visits there we would embark on our usual long discussions on all sorts of issues, with a strong focus on faith and afterlife.

My friend used his time to record in video the book he had never sat down to write. Months before the end he entrusted me with a recorded farewell message, to be played at the end of his funeral service. Gradually his voice abandoned him, and he was started on palliative sedation. A few days later he passed away peacefully, surrounded by his family, seven months from the diagnosis. Now I was the only one left from that original trio.

In the evening after the funeral I switched on my cell phone and was faced with his name, number and email address. I could not hold back my tears. I did not have the heart to delete them and finalize the loss.

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