

Tuesdays with Ted

An uplifting, heartbreaking, often funny story about an old man with ALS, a sitcom, its star and just enough time for a son to say good-bye



By
Russ Woody

With apologies to Mitch Albom

Why “*Tuesdays With Ted*”?

Becker was filmed on Tuesdays in front of a live audience. After the author’s father, “Woody,” was diagnosed with ALS (the same disease that took Morrie Schwartz, the subject of Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays With Morrie*), Woody moved to Los Angeles and came to the show every Tuesday night. Over the course of a year and a half, the cast and crew, the writers and especially Ted Danson, grew to care for and even love him.

This is that story.

Tuesdays with Ted

THIS BOOK was written for my sons Henry and Joe,
so they might better understand what was going on around them
when they were too young to fully grasp its meaning.

They knew their grandfather was dying,
but they couldn't know the extent
of the love I had for him.

It is a love that is very much alive still
in my love for both of them.



Tuesdays with Ted

The Man in the Tux

TED DANSON STOOD in the strident glare of the Beverly Hilton's stage lights, shading his eyes to search for my father amidst the sea of several hundred tuxedos and glittering evening gowns that filled the hotel's expansive dining room. He was accepting an award from the Muscular Dystrophy Association for an episode of *Becker*, an episode I'd written about my dad.

Ted called into the microphone, "Woody?"

From a large table near the back railing of the main floor, my father put his hand in the air and waved as though to a distant ship. He had always been called by his last name, deciding early on it was preferable to his other two names: Claude and Herman.

"Yes, I see you raising your hand," the actor said, as a few hundred faces turned to find Woody in the audience. He was handsome, my dad, movie star handsome when he was younger, with still a full head of sturdy white hair and steel blue eyes. He had arrived at the Beverly Hilton that evening by limousine, the first he'd ever ridden in, donning a jet-black tuxedo, the first he'd ever worn.

Emotion edged its way into Ted's words, as he put a hand to his heart and leaned again into the microphone. "You make me miss my daddy."

Beneath the dining room's flowing crystal chandeliers, the only sounds made came from wait and bus people, moving from table to table like roving cats, removing thick china and glinting silverware. My father's sister, sitting next to him, reached over and touched his arm. My wife, on the other side of him, rested a gentle hand on his shoulder. At the same time, a small wave of self-conscious laughter rippled through the audience, as many became aware of themselves; women—who sought tissues from purses to wipe away emerging tears—and men struggling to deny needing the same.

I'd been writing and producing television shows, mostly sitcoms, for nearly twenty years, but only recently had my father seen much of my world. Now he was in the middle of it, and on this night, the object of it.

"It's a joy for all of us to be here to honor you," Ted said to him across the massive room. "You've made our year at *Becker* really special, Woody."

It was a moment in time that will never leave my heart. But there were more moments to come that evening, more that would shine brightly; moments that, ultimately, had to be clutched and pulled close, committed to memory and held as floating beacons amidst the 17 short months I was able to spend with my dad while he was dying.



HE WAS DIAGNOSED IN the spring of 2001 with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, ALS—Lou Gehrig's disease—a fatal illness that gradually paralyzes its victim.

Three days after his diagnosis, my mother died unexpectedly from complications of a bleeding ulcer.

They'd been married 58 years.

And while my father's life was winding down, with the death of my mother, it was also—it has to be said—opening up. He had always been easy going, gregarious, fun to be with; qualities that perhaps fueled my mother's emotional insecurities. Insecurities that, in turn, drove her to feel threatened by his relationships with just about everyone, including me. And that's what would be both so sweet and heartbreaking about the months that were to follow—I was finally able to spend all the time I wanted with my dad, but *time* was something we had little of.

As a result, the time we did spend together presented a rarified window, a sliver of light that flashed across the sky like the wing of a Blue Angel. I couldn't stop the spinning clock, couldn't steal more time, but I could cling to those moments we had. To be sure, most of them were more prosaic than profound; they were the everyday dribble of banalities that are hardly noticed until due to expire. Watching TV, I would turn and quietly study him, the familiar wrinkles of his hands, the crappy Timex at his wrist, the faded tattoo above it on his forearm: an eagle atop the U.S.M.C.'s globe and anchor, now a fading image that I had traced a million times when I was small and sitting on his lap. I found myself secretly eye-balling him like he was a curious stranger in the next booth of a diner—the crease of his ear, the lines of his forehead, the dark hair of his eyebrows—I soaked it in, as much as I could, knowing that he, like his tattoo, was fading.

To be with him, to be with a parent, while he is dying, is one of the most human of experiences. It is what we are supposed to do. And while those months were difficult in myriad ways, they were also the richest and most rewarding of my life. They were, as well, chockablock with humor, since—as nearly any comedy writer will tell you—in the midst of great hardship, there is always funny.

Though at the time, I didn't think of the experience as an "honor," as I look back, I realize that it was an honor of the highest order.