

An excerpt from

ENGAGEMENT RULES

by Rich Orloff

Place: San Diego
Time: The present
Characters: TOM and DONNA, early 30's
PHIL and ROSE, 70's

ENGAGEMENT RULES focuses on the intertwined lives of two couples who are best friends. TOM and DONNA, in their early 30's, live together and, in the first scene, they become engaged. Tom designs rocket propulsion systems, and Donna is just beginning law school, which she finds exhausting and overwhelming. PHIL and ROSE, in their 70's and both retired, have been married 53 years (or as Phil puts it, "371 dog years"). Recently Rose resumed going to church, but Phil adamantly refuses to go with her.

One night of passionate sex between Tom and Donna develops consequences for all. When Tom tells Phil that when he and Donna make love, "our souls touch", Phil begins to wonder what he's been missing and how to achieve it. Meanwhile, Donna becomes queasy during classes at law school, and...

Tom and Donna's bedroom

Tom and Donna are looking at a home pregnancy kit strip.

Wow.	DONNA
Yeah.	TOM
God.	DONNA
Yep.	TOM
Well.	DONNA
Well.	TOM

DONNA

I'm so glad we can talk these things out.

TOM

So what are you thinking?

DONNA

I'll let you know what I'm thinking as soon as my brain stops screaming.

TOM

Donna, I'd love to have a child, but it doesn't have to be now. It's your body, and I'll support any decision you make.

DONNA

Tom, I appreciate that, but we're a couple now, and any decision about this will affect you as well as me, and I think this should be a joint decision.

TOM

(after a beat:)

Well, now that we've both said what we're supposed to say, what do we really think?

DONNA

I think... I think... Holy shit.

TOM

I agree with you 100%.

Men's locker room

PHIL

Can I say just one word?

TOM

Sure.

PHIL

Condoms!

TOM

I know.

PHIL

If I taught my son anything, it's one thing:
Condoms!

TOM

What did you teach your daughters?

PHIL

Men are scum. Between "condoms" and "men are scum", I guarantee you all of my grandchildren are planned.

TOM

I miscounted. Her periods are extremely regular. I didn't even think I was going to be able to – Okay, I'm an idiot.

PHIL

So what now, idiot?

TOM

Whatever Donna wants.

PHIL

You're going to make a great husband.

TOM

I hope so.

PHIL

Oh, Tommy, one more thing.

TOM

I know: *Condoms!*

PHIL

No, no, no; something else.

TOM

What?

PHIL

Can you... can you score me some Viagra?

TOM

"Score Viagra"?

PHIL

Just three or four. For a rainy day.

TOM

A rainy day.

PHIL

Like when the Padres are rained out.

TOM

Why don't you ask your doctor?

PHIL

My doctor? This is personal.

TOM

Yes, but he is your -

PHIL

First of all, Rose and I share the same doctor.
Second of all, *he* happens to be a *she*.
Third of all, our pharmacist is a member
of Rose's church.

TOM

I'll ask around.

PHIL

Thanks.

TOM

You realize when I say it's for a friend,
nobody's going to believe me.

PHIL

I'm still willing to take you to a
strip joint for your bachelor's party.

They start to go.

TOM

That's okay, Phil.

PHIL

As long as I use cash, there won't be a record!

Women's locker room

DONNA

Well, at least I don't have the flu.

ROSE

Have you decided what to do?

DONNA

Tom and I are going to discuss it when I get home.

ROSE

Tom will go along with whatever you decide.

DONNA

I know. I just figure that if it feels like *both* of us are deciding, it'll be easier to decide.

ROSE

And what have *both* of you decided?

DONNA

Well, I'd like to have a kid someday. And there's no guarantee I'll get pregnant again.

ROSE

That's true.

DONNA

And if I don't have the kid, and if I can't have a kid later, even if Tom never said anything, I'd know he'd be disappointed.

ROSE

That's probably true, too.

DONNA

We'd both be, but; but if I do have the kid, instead of listening to the voice inside that tells me... over and over... I mean, part of me *wants* to want it, but that isn't wanting it, and and –

ROSE

You might grow to want it.

DONNA

Can you guarantee that?

ROSE

No, but you never know how things will work out.

DONNA

I think I was fifteen when I finally put it together, when I finally figured out my parents had to get married because my mom was pregnant with me. I wasn't exactly surprised. I certainly never believed they got married because they loved each other. I just had always assumed they got married because they were my parents, and therefore they were stupid. But what really seemed stupid was how long they stayed together, for the sake of the kid. If they had asked the kid, the kid would've said, get a divorce! I'll help you pack! It can't be worse than hiding in my room and hearing your voices go through wall after wall because your screaming is that loud. It can't be worse than sitting at the dinner table, where people are *supposed* to use their voices, and hear nothing but silence. When I ate at friends' homes, the air was energized, with spirit ping-ponging in all directions. The next night it was back to the silence, and I wanted to ask my parents, "Can we play make-believe tonight and pretend we're a different family?" For years I was so angry at them, so, so: How could you? For years, they weren't living lives, they were just killing time.

ROSE

But you and Tom love each other.

DONNA

Didn't you just say: You never know how things will turn out?

ROSE

Donna, you wouldn't be your mother. You'd be a very good mother.

DONNA

Maybe. I don't know. It's just, it's just so weird to think... if my mom hadn't been too scared to have an abortion, if she hadn't been convinced she'd fry in hell if she had one, I wouldn't exist.

Tom and Donna's apartment

Tom is looking at wedding magazines and playing with a calculator.
Donna enters. She looks drained.

DONNA

Hi, honey.

TOM

Well, I've done the math. If we really watch our pennies, the wedding will only be twice as much as we can afford.

DONNA

Oh.

TOM

But you know me. I've come up with a solution.

DONNA

What?

TOM

We should get married one at a time. So...

DONNA

I know we agreed to talk tonight, but can I have a few minutes first to putter around and get home?

TOM

Sure.

Donna sits on the couch. She doesn't move. Tom goes back to his magazines. Then:

TOM (cont'd)

You're not puttering.

DONNA

I'm working up the energy.

Donna continues to sit. She shuts her eyes. Tom notices. He exits and returns with a pillow and blanket. He puts the pillow on the end of the couch. He leans Donna over and puts her head on the pillow. She lets him. He puts the blanket over her, and tucks her in. He looks at her.

DONNA (cont'd)

You'd make a great dad, Tom.

Men's locker room

PHIL

So you never talked?

TOM

(still looking at Donna:)

She napped on the couch two hours, woke up, had a bowl of chocolate marshmallow cashew fudge ice cream, and went to bed.

Tom crosses to the locker room.

PHIL

You know, when I was a kid, there were three ice cream flavors: vanilla, chocolate and strawberry. Butter pecan was exotic. And you know something? Life was okay. We didn't need blueberry-cookie dough-marshmallow-bacon lettuce and tomato ice cream. I now have over two hundred TV channels in my home, and it's 99% crap. When there were five stations, it was 99% crap, but now it takes me forty times as long to surf through all the crap. What idiot decided this was progress?

TOM

Don't ask me.

PHIL

When I was a teenager, I thought there were only two sexual positions: "with somebody else" and "alone". And that was enough.

TOM

You know, as I watched her napping, all tucked in, a little drool on her chin... I kept staring at her, thinking about how as she slept, cells inside her womb were furiously dividing, half her chromosomes, half mine, creating a completely unique contribution to the universe. I kept looking at her and wondering: Whose nose will it have? Whose eyes? There are an infinite number of ways our genes can combine, and each of them sounds perfect.

PHIL

Maybe what happened wasn't an accident.

TOM

It was an accident.

PHIL

Maybe –

TOM

You know, sometimes I'm careless crossing the street, but if a truck ran me over, it'd still be an accident.

PHIL

Get run over by a truck, and we'll discuss it.

TOM

I don't think I was careless because I'd like to have kids. I was careless because the condoms were in another room, and it was like a half-day past her "I can't conceive" time of the month, and, and she's just so damn hot I wanted her.

PHIL

I'll buy that. My daughter the shrink might not, but she overcharges anyway.

TOM

As I was on the treadmill, I kept thinking, "I could be a dad." And I felt this, this thrill I never even imagined I might feel.

PHIL

I know that feeling.

TOM

I guess I want this kid, huh?

PHIL

Yep.

TOM

Do you think I should tell Donna?

PHIL

Not in this lifetime.

TOM

I guess you're right.

PHIL
Good luck.

TOM
Oh, Phil...

Tom gives Phil a vial with a few pills in it.

TOM (cont'd)
Good luck to you.

PHIL
(looking at the pills:)
Take me to the promised land!

Rose and Phil's apartment

Phil reads the newspaper. An off-stage door shuts.
Rose enters with a large bouquet of flowers.

ROSE
Hi, honey.

PHIL
Hi, darling.

Rose crosses and exits. Phil pops a pill. Rose returns.

PHIL (cont'd)
So are you ready to be ravaged?

ROSE
I think time beat you to that, Phil.

PHIL
I'm looking forward to an uninhibited n—

ROSE
Give me a little time to get home, okay, Phil?

PHIL
Take all the time you want.
Take twenty minutes to an hour.

ROSE
Phil, I've been giving this matter
a lot of thinking.

PHIL

I hate when you do that.

ROSE

Listen to me.

PHIL

Last time you did that, you got me to agree to stop driving after dark.

ROSE

Phil, I don't claim to understand your sudden need for sexual experimentation –

PHIL

It's –

ROSE

But I see that it's important to you, very important, and that's enough to make it important to me. If you want me to be your partner in a mutual exploration of sexual possibilities, I will be your partner, and I will commit to it fully and completely. I mean that.

PHIL

(takes it in, then:)

I'm not giving up my driver's license.

ROSE

I'm not asking you to give up your driver's license.

PHIL

You want me to revise our health care proxies *again*?

ROSE

Our health care proxies are fine.

PHIL

If either of our sons-in-law want more money, remember: Do Not Resuscitate.

ROSE

Phil, I think you're a generous and loving man.

PHIL

Oh, this is going to be big, isn't it?

ROSE
I just want a little of your time.

PHIL
How little?

ROSE
An hour a week.

PHIL
(gets it, then:)
I'm not going to church!

ROSE
Phil, if you want me on Tuesday nights,
you'll have to give me Sunday mornings.

PHIL
Well, I can't go this Sunday.

ROSE
Why not?

PHIL
There's a game on.

ROSE
What game?

PHIL
We have two hundred channels; I'll find a game.

ROSE
Phil!

PHIL
You really want me to just sit there
knowing how miserable I am?

ROSE
I promise not to ask you to fake enjoyment.

PHIL
Look, have I ever stopped you from going to
church? Not once. You have my full support.

ROSE
And if you want to explore sex by yourself,
you have my full support, too.

PHIL

Rose, *I don't believe.*

ROSE

You don't believe in God?

PHIL

Certainly not the one I hear about in church. Not the one of "Admit that I'm tops, and I'll forgive all your sins."

ROSE

Phil –

PHIL

Not the one of "You better believe in me, or I'll damn you forever."

ROSE

That's not the God I pray to! I pray to the God of tolerance and forgiveness, which is how our marriage has lasted 53 years!

PHIL

You know, just because I'm sitting there doesn't mean I'm going to believe in anything.

ROSE

And you can spend an hour stroking me with a feather, but there's no guarantee I'll get aroused.

PHIL

Rose...

ROSE

(sweetly and warmly)

Phil, I'll purr in your ear, I'll learn to talk dirty, I'll do anything you ask. All I ask is that my husband, my soulmate, sits next to me at church.

During the above, Rose has begun to lightly stroke one of Phil's legs. She continues to stroke it lightly in silence. Phil begins to like it. Then:

PHIL

I hate modern medicine!

Tom and Donna's apartment

Tom is at the computer. Donna enters with law books.

DONNA

I can't believe how much studying I have to do. Half of each of these books have to end up inside my brain in the next few weeks. There's no room; I'm going to have to throw out things I know.

TOM

Donna –

DONNA

I look at some of the kids just out of undergrad, who seem capable of absorbing everything so quickly, and I think, have I lost that many brain cells in the last decade?

TOM

Donna –

DONNA

Today in class – by the way, I can babble on-and-on for hours. It's one of the first skills they teach you in law school.

TOM

I'm ready to talk. Are you?

DONNA

Yeah. Tom, I –

TOM

I've given this matter a lot of serious thought.

DONNA

So have I.

TOM

And I've done a lot of research, and I figure, well, if you take one semester off, just one, and then you reduce your load by one-third but continue through summers – and I checked, your school is very flexible about these things – you'll still be able to get your degree in four years, five years max.

DONNA

I know, but –

TOM

And if we wait three years – and I know this is a sensitive area – but according to everything I've read, after 35 women's fertility rates decrease significantly, while the chance of a mis–

DONNA

There are alt—

TOM

And given the demands of a career in law, well, if you have a child now –

DONNA

Tom –

TOM

– when your lifestyle affords *some* flexibility –

DONNA

Tom! Are we having a conversation, or is this your opening statement? Because if it is, I'll be glad to debate each of your points.

TOM

I'm sorry, I'm, I'm nervous, and, and I didn't think it'd be enough to say, "I'm ready".

DONNA

I wish I were, Tom, but –

TOM

Donna, I think you'll make a great –

DONNA

Tom –

TOM

Just hear me out, okay? I've seen what you've done in the world, and how you never believe you can do it until you've done it. You can do this.

DONNA

Tom, I don't want to have a kid because it'd be character-building!

TOM

I don't mean that, I -

DONNA

I know, I'm sorry I -

TOM

Have you ever *really* considered keeping -

DONNA

Of course. I mean, once I got over the embarrassment of buying a maternity wedding dress. I'd love to have a child with you someday. And I wish I could say, "Yes, let's do it now." I've even practiced saying that. But I never once sounded convincing to myself.

TOM

Let me convince you.

DONNA

Please don't.

TOM

I just think there's a miracle going on -

DONNA

NO! Do not go there. I've seen women who have been counseled about miracles and God's will, and they're scarred for life. I'm sorry we were negligent. I'm sorry I was negligent. And I'm sorry it's there.

TOM

"It"? The chair is an it; the couch is an it. What's inside you is what, six, seven weeks now? He or she has the beginnings of a heart and eyes and -

DONNA

I've looked at the pictures, too, Tom! It's still too early to tell if it's a boy or a girl. It doesn't have a heart; it has a heart *bulge*. It doesn't have eyes; it has eye *spots*. Its intestines aren't even in the body; they're still in the umbilical cord. If you really want to debate me on this, I'm prepared.

TOM

Donna, I don't -... Is there any way I can have doubts about abortion without becoming the enemy?

DONNA

Of course. In theory.

TOM

I fully support your right not to be forced to do anything against your will. But whether it's a he, she or it, I, I already care about it.

DONNA

So do, I, Tom. I swear to God, so do I. Tom, you wake up, and you're glad to be alive. I'm more ambivalent. I'm not suicidal, I'm just ambivalent, but I figure, okay, so I'm ambivalent about life, soldier on. I can see the good I can do. I can see the joy I can have, especially with you. But I never look at life itself and reduce it to "This is good". Every day I feel the pros and cons. Every day my goal is that by the time I fall asleep, I'll have more arguments pro.

TOM

And your courage is -

DONNA

I know what it's like to enter life unwanted, and I respect life too much to wish that on anyone.

TOM

I'll stay at home.

DONNA

Will your company give you maternity leave, or will you just quit?

TOM

I'll don't care; I'll -

DONNA

You know how long it took you to find -

TOM

We'll work that -

DONNA

And what am I supposed to do
when I come home, just ignore it?

TOM

Of course not –

DONNA

If and when we have kids, I want to be
a good mom.

TOM

And what if when you're ready, you can't?

DONNA

I know women who've had abortions and years
later can't conceive, and yes, some feel like
they made the biggest mistake of their lives.

TOM

See –

DONNA

I also know plenty of women think it's the best
decision they ever made, regardless of how
their life has turned out since. I don't know
which type of woman I'll be in the future;
I only know who I am now.

TOM

Donna –

DONNA

I can't do it.

TOM

Donna –

DONNA

(losing it:)

I can't, I can't, I can't!

For a moment, there is quiet in the room.

TOM

Donna...

DONNA

Tom, if you believe we should have this kid even though I don't, even though I can't say yes with a full heart – I've tried, but I can't – do you still want me to go ahead with the pregnancy?

TOM

No.

DONNA

Thank you.

TOM

But –

DONNA

But what?!

TOM

At what point... I mean, in all the reading I've done, in all the photos, beyond the development of eyes and hearts and spots and bulges and and and, damn it, nobody, on either side, nobody has been able to definitively and scientifically answer a question that I've wrestling with over and over, that that I consider the only question that really matters.

DONNA

What?

TOM

At what point during pregnancy... at what point... at what point does the soul begin?

Tom and Donna look at each other.

The lights fade.

END OF ACT ONE