

STRICKLAND'S DILEMMA

a short Bahá'í play by

James Tichenor

jtichenorwriter@gmail.com

January 29, 2024

Cast of Characters

Carlos (21) a medical student

Ben Strickland (21) a law student

Shahrzad (20) a student and secretary of
the Area Teaching Committee

Denise (17) a freshman student and newly
declared Bahá'í

M'kayla (20) a fellow student in Carlos'
study group

NOTE: At the bottom of page one and
the top of page two Carlos and Ben
each have a line concerning a
football game scheduled for that
evening. A production may wish to
modify these two lines to reflect
regional teams to suit their
audience.

"Strickland's Dilemma"

SETTING: An apartment: a love seat and two chairs, or at least minimum, three chairs. Doorways left and right, real or imagined.

AT RISE: CARLOS sits alone studying with flash cards.

CARLOS
(reads slowly, reacts
to each choice)

The epicardium -- "Is the pacemaker of the heart." Oh, come on! "Is a layer of cardiac muscle." No. Has to be, "Lines the heart chambers," I think... Oh, man, no. I think it's the "Visceral pericardium." Yeah, that's it.

He flips the flash card over.

CARLOS

YES!

Carlos turns up and reacts to the next card.

CARLOS

Oh, no!

BEN STRICKLAND enters, dropping his jacket over a chair and a book-bag on the floor. He stretches his back and sits.

BEN
(noticing Carlos'
tension)

Hey, Carlos. How's it going? Something wrong, buddy?

CARLOS

Nah. All good.

(beat)
Working on anatomy... Still.
(glancing up grinning)
Ready for the Birds' game tonight, though.

Ben takes out a heavy law case book and highlighter.

BEN

Yup. We'll see how their offense does in the Meadowlands this time. Can't wait.

Ben highlights his text. He just barely pays attention to Carlos who reacts to each card.

CARLOS

(about a card)

I knew it! YES!

(to Ben)

M'kayla's dropping over in a little while. We're studying together. There's a quiz tomorrow.

Carlos looks at a new card.

BEN

Yeah. All right. She'll be gone before the game, right?

CARLOS

Yeah. Of course, Ben.

(murmuring to himself)

Which chamber's outer wall forms most of the sternocostal surface of the heart? Left atrium, left ventricle, right-- Oh, oh, oh! Has to be right ventricle.

Carlos turns the card over.

CARLOS

Yes! Gonna ace this sucker!

Ben looks up, wanting quiet.

He clears his throat.

Carlos looks up at Ben.

CARLOS

Sorry! Sorry.

Carlos turns up a new card.

BEN

No problem, my friend.

Carlos mumbles inaudibly about the heart in a lower voice.

Ben highlights his casebook.

BEN

That's much better. Thanks, I've got enough to memorize here with these cases. I can't do heart anatomy, too.

Ha ha ha!

CARLOS

SOUND EFFECT: Knock at door.

CARLOS

You expecting anyone? It's too early for M'kayla, for sure.

BEN

No. I'm not expecting anybody. No idea.

CARLOS

She just called a couple of minutes ago.

Ben goes to the door.

BEN

I'll get it.

Shahrzad and Denise enter
wearing coats.

SHAHRZAD

Hi, Ben! Can we come in?

BEN

Hey! How's it going, Shahrzad? Sure. Come on in.

SHAHRZAD

Phew! It's getting cold out there! I'm good, thanks. This is Denise. You know, from school. Denise, this is Ben and Carlos.

DENISE

Hi!

Shahrzad and Denise loosen
their coats and scarves but
don't remove them.

BEN

Hi. Oh, I ... The new Bahá'í? Hi!

Ben is curious why they're
here but doesn't say so.

CARLOS

(to Denise)

Hello.

Carlos barely acknowledges
Denise. He turns his attention
back to his cards.

From here on his studying,
alone and later with M'Kayla,
Carlos is quieter or even
pantomimes in the background
not to distract the audience.

DENISE
(to Carlos)

Hello. How are you?

BEN
(finally has to ask
but chuckling)

What's up? What brings you here to our student lounge, I mean
apartment?

Denise smiles shyly.

SHAHZRAD
(laughs)

I know we're imposing a little but I hope it's okay. How's it
going?

BEN
No, it's all right. You know, study, study, study. Lots of
torts cases to read. Then I have a Law Memo to outline.
(Still wants to
know why they're
there)

Can we help you somehow?

SHAHZRAD
So. We were coming from school and I have an Area Teaching
Committee meeting in a half hour. And... well, your guys'
apartment is on the way and we wondered if we could borrow
your kitchen. Just for a few minutes?

Ben returns to his seat.

BEN
Aha! Oh, sure.

The women take their jackets
off and put them on a chair.

BEN
But there isn't much food in there, you know.

Carlos turns the card over. He
is upset that he was wrong,
but only shows silent
frustration.

SHAHZRZAD

(laughing)

Oh, no! Denise just declared Tuesday and wanted to learn a song. We wanted to get out of the cold for a minute to rehearse. It would take too long to go back to our rooms.

BEN

(finally getting it)

Oh. I see...

SHAHZRZAD

(offers to put coat
back on)

We can go somewhere else. We don't want--

BEN

(relieved not to
have to do more)

Oh. No! Sure. That's fine. It won't bother us. Right, Carlos?

CARLOS

Hunh? What? Oh, why not? Go ahead. It's okay with me.

Shahrzad and Denise cross and
pause by kitchen door.

SHAHZRZAD

Either of you guys able to help with the outreach on Saturday?

Carlos turns up another card.

CARLOS

(dismissively)

Doubt it. Studying. You know.

SHAHZRZAD

Oh, well. If you can.
Ben?

BEN

I don't think so. I
... No. Don't think
I can.

(slightly guilty)

Do you have enough
people?

CARLOS

(to himself, inaudible
beneath the others;
mouthed in pantomime)

*The heart sound associated
with the mitral valve is
best heard: A. In the
jugular notch; B. In the
second left intercostal
space; C. In the second
right intercostal space;
D. In the fifth left
intercostal space; E. To
the right of the xiphoid
process?*

Carlos mulls the problem.

SHAHZRZAD

**Okay. We'll get it
done somehow. We won't
be long here.**

(to Denise)

**Come on. It's through
here.**

The women move toward the
kitchen.

DENISE

(shyly)

Thank you.

BEN

(playfully formal)

You're quite welcome.

Shahrzad and Denise exit.

Ben returns to his casebook.

Carlos turns over the card.

CARLOS

I think... No. Really?! The fifth left intercostal space?

Ben puts his fingers in his
ears, trying to concentrate.

CARLOS

(noticing Ben
covering his ears)

Sorry. I'll be quiet.

BEN

(turning a page)

That's okay, Carlos. I'll move into the dorms next week.

CARLOS

Ha, ha, ha!

Offstage the young women begin
to rehearse.

SHAHZRZAD (O.S.)

(reciting)

**O Lord! I am weak, strengthen me with Thy power and potency.
My tongue falters, suffer me to utter Thy commemoration and
praise. I am lowly, honor me through admitting me into Thy
kingdom.**

Ben closes his book and opens his computer.

SHAHZRAD (O.S.)

Now, it goes like this.

(singing and
instructing)

"O Lord! I am weak." Then you respond, and then I go on.

"Strengthen me with Thy power and potency." You respond, you know, repeat it.

Ben is impressed and nods in time with the singing.

He scrolls through text messages.

DENISE (O.S.)

(weakly)

"Thy power and potency."

CARLOS

They sound good, don't they?

BEN

Yeah. Nice.

SHAHZRAD (O.S.)

That's it. Now I sing, "My tongue falters." And you repeat it.

DENISE (O.S.)

"My tongue falters..."

SHAHZRAD (O.S.)

That's great. Don't be afraid. You sound good. You don't have to really falter.

The young women giggle.

*Their voices continue quietly
singing in the background.
Actually humming.*

Ben scrolls through messages.
Suddenly he sits up.

BEN

(upset)

Oh, man!

CARLOS

What's up?

BEN

I don't believe this!

CARLOS

What? Come on, dude! What?

BEN

It's from the Regional Council. I had my messages off.

CARLOS

Yeah? And...?

BEN

They want me to call them. Something about serving on the Area Teaching Committee.

CARLOS

Wait! What? That is so cool!

BEN

Yeah, but...

CARLOS

No "buts," man. That's great.

BEN

Yeah. But I can't get done what I'm doing now. How can I add this?

CARLOS

You'll figure it out.

(returns to cards)

It's nice to be considered, though.

BEN

I'm going to have to tell them no.

Ben closes his computer and reopens the casebook.

SOUND EFFECT: Knock at door

BEN

Now what?

CARLOS

I guess this has got to be M'kayla!

Carlos goes to door. The singing in the background continues.

BEN

Oh. Okay.

M'kayla enters and slips off her coat.

M'KAYLA
Hi, Ben. Yes, I know who you are.

BEN
Oh, okay. We met at the lounge the other day, right?

M'KAYLA
Yep, that's right.

She finds the last available seat and takes out a notebook.

M'KAYLA
(to Carlos)
So! You're using the flash cards now? Okay. Let's go. I can't stay long. What's all this singing?

BEN
Some of the Bahá'í women working on a song.

M'KAYLA
Oh. They got a nice sweet sound going on.

BEN
They sure do.

CARLOS
I'm working on the heart anatomy questions, M'kayla. Good?

M'KAYLA
All righty! Give me the cards. I'll ask you the next one.

The singing stops and Shahrzad and Denise reenter.

BEN
(to Shahrzad)
Finished already?

SHAHRZAD
Yes. I think we've got it.

DENISE
I think I memorized it.

Shahrzad and Denise drift back across toward the front door, reluctant to go back into the cold.

Denise hums the melody softly
to herself.

BEN
(realizing M'kayla
has come in after
the others)

Oh! Shahrzad, this is M'kayla. M'kayla, this is Shahrzad and Denise.

Shahrzad and Denise pick up
their coats.

SHAHZRZAD
Hello, M'kayla. How are you?

M'KAYLA
Hey. Doing okay. You?

DENISE
Hi.

CARLOS
Shahrzad! Did you know Ben was appointed to the ATC?

SHAHZRZAD
No, I didn't--

BEN
(cutting in)
They're just asking... I didn't accept it, though, did I?

CARLOS
But that's cool anyways, right?

Carlos shrugs nonchalantly and
returns to the cards he's
studying with M'kayla.

SHAHZRAD
(ignoring Carlos)
**Why? Why not accept
it, Ben?**

BEN
**I just can't. I can't
do all... Everything.
You know. Studying
and ... Well, you
know. I help out when
I can.**

SHAHZRAD
**Oh, I know. But you'd
be really good on the
ATC. I'm glad the
Council appointed
you.**

BEN
**But I didn't accept.
And they're just, you
know... asking.**

Ben and Shahrzad are
surprised at the sudden
outburst from Carlos.

They smile at each other.

Ben shrugs.

Ben turns back to his
casebook.

Shahrzad is thinking of
something to say to Ben.

Denise pulls at Shahrzad's
sleeve.

DENISE
What's an ATC?

SHAHZRAD
**A committee that works
on coordinating things
like devotional
meetings and home
visits. It's where
I'm going tonight
after I drop you off.**

Carlos and M'kayla quiz each
other in pantomime while Ben
and Shahrzad talk.

M'KAYLA
(inaudible)
*The valve located between
the left atrium and left
ventricle is the -- A)
Aortic semilunar valve. B)
Bicuspid (mitral) Valve.
C) Pulmonary semilunar
valve. D) Tricuspid valve?*

CARLOS
(thinking carefully
and inaudible)
*Wait, wait, wait... I
know this.*

Carlos watches M'kayla
examining the card.

CARLOS
(suddenly loud)
The tricuspid?

M'KAYLA
(sternly, aloud)
Are you sure?

Carlos reaches for the card
but M'kayla holds it away.
She teases him, dragging out
her answer.

M'KAYLA
Then, in that case... Yes!

M'kayla holds up the card for
Carlos to see for himself.

CARLOS
Whew! Told you.

DENISE

Oh. Can I come?

SHAHRZAD

Sure. You can come. I know they'll be happy to meet you.

(to Ben)

Ben, Did you tell them "no?" I don't think you should respond too quickly, you know, without seriously thinking about it.

BEN

Well, no. Not yet. I'm pretty sure they just wanted to see if I could do it. Let me see what they said.

Ben checks his phone to be sure what the email said. His book remains open.

SHAHRZAD

Maybe you should think about it, Ben. You know we could really use your help. Arlene had to drop out of the teaching campaign because her mom's sick. You knew that, right?

BEN

No, I didn't.

CARLOS

(to Shahrzad,
blithely)

That's too bad.

M'kayla rebukes him as she hears Carlos' offhand response to Shahrzad.

CARLOS

(turning back to
M'kayla)

Next one?

Denise sings softly at
the door.

DENISE
My tongue falters.

Shahrzad shrugs with
resignation.

DENISE
Suffer me to utter...

SHAHRZAD
**Well we can each only
do what we can do,
you know. We can only
try.**

DENISE
**Thy commemoration and
praise...**

SHAHRZAD
Well, let's go, Denise.

M'kayla turns up a new card.

M'KAYLA
(refocusing, but in
pantomime)
*The second heart sound,
described as "dupp" is
actually the sound of the --
A) Atria contracting. B)
Ventricles contracting. C)
Atrioventricular valves
closing. D) Semilunar valves
closing. E) Heart slapping
the liver?*

CARLOS
(aloud)
Oh, jeez! Five choices?!

M'KAYLA
(aloud)
**You only need one, Dude...
But make it the right
one!**

Denise goes to the door singing,
holding it open.

Shahrzad stops on the way to
the door to ask Ben something
more.

There is a pause as Carlos
thinks, M'kayla waits, Ben
listens, Shahrzad thinks what
to ask. They all hear Denise's
voice off stage singing sweetly.

DENISE (O.S.)
Strengthen me with Thy power and potency.

Ben begins to smile.

SHAHRZAD
Well. I don't know what I was going to ask.

Shahrzad nods toward the
doorway.

SHAHZRZAD
(still to Ben, about
the singing)

Beautiful, isn't it?

(beat)

Well. See you.

Shahrzad follows Denise out.

BEN

Wait!

Shahrzad steps back into room.
Denise stops singing.

SHAHZRZAD

Are you talking to me, Ben?

BEN

Yeah. Wait a minute, please.

CARLOS

Slapping the liver!!? Really?!

Ben snaps his case book closed.

CARLOS
(quietly, noticing
Ben's action)

Uh oh!

Denise sticks her head back in
to see what's happening. Starts
to sing again.

M'KAYLA

Is that your guess?

Ben puts his text book away
and gets up.

Carlos speaks hurriedly, wanting
to get this answer out of the
way so he can question Ben.

CARLOS
(watching Ben with
increasing curiosity)

I'm not guessing. Mostly not. No. It's the aortic valve
closing, and the ... What are they calling it? The semilunar
valves?

M'KAYLA

That's right.

Ben slips into his jacket.

CARLOS
(to Ben; now clearly
worried)

What are you doing? Where are you going?

BEN
(to Carlos)

Out.

(to Shahrzad)

Wait. I'm coming with you to the ATC meeting. We'll see whether I can really be of help.

SHAHRZAD
Great! I'm sure you will! But what about your studies? Reading cases?

Ben crosses to the door taking
his jacket.

BEN
Actually, I can do that later.

CARLOS
Hold on! What about the game tonight? That's "later!"

BEN
Let me know how it turns out, okay? I'll be studying then. See you in a bit.

CARLOS
(plaintively)
Oh, man. No.

Ben follows Shahrzad out. They
exit with Denise.

DENISE AND SHAHRZAD (O.S.)
...With Thy power and potency.

M'KAYLA
Why is football so important to you guys?

CARLOS
I really don't know.
(shaking his head)
I really don't... I guess maybe it isn't? For Ben anyways.

M'kayla shrugs.

M'KAYLA
Well, back to guessing then.

CARLOS
(indignantly)

I'm not guessing. I told you! I know this stuff.

They pick up their flash cards.
M'kayla turns to the next card.

M'KAYLA
Okay. We'll see if you know your heart as well as you know
your football, then.

BLACKOUT

*Cast sings "I Am Weak" together
and invites audience to join
in instead of customary bows.*