The Way of All Fish is the first part of Power Plays, three one-act plays by Elaine May and Alan Arkin. It was originally produced in New York City by Julian Schlossberg, Meyer Ackerman, Ben Sprecher and William P. Miller, and the Manhattan Theatre Club, Lynne Meadow, artistic director; Barry Grove, executive producer; on April 14, 1998. The set design was by Michael McGarty; costume design was by Michael Krass; lighting design was by Adam Silverman; sound design was by Andrew Keister; the production stage manager was Andrew Neal. Alan Arkin directed the following cast at the Promenade Theatre:

**Ms. Asquith**  Elaine May
**Miss Riverton**  Jeannie Berlin


**Ms. Asquith**: Miss Riverton.

**Miss Riverton**: Yes?

**Ms. Asquith**: Do you remember my distinctly telling you that I wanted nothing thrown out?

**Miss Riverton**: Yes.

**Ms. Asquith**: Well, you’ve thrown out my exercise elastic.

**Miss Riverton**: Oh, I don’t think so.

**Ms. Asquith**: Well, here it is—in the wastebasket and I didn’t put it there.

**Miss Riverton**: Oh, is that your... Oh, forgive me. I thought it was a piece of old rubber.

**Ms. Asquith**: It doesn’t matter what you thought it was. The point is—you threw it out.
MISS RIVERTON: Well, yes... because I thought it was rubbish.

MS. ASQUITH: Miss Riverton, I didn't ask you to use your best judgment. I didn't say, "Throw out what you think is rubbish and keep the rest." I said, "Don't throw anything out."

MISS RIVERTON: Well... but what about rubbish?

MS. ASQUITH: Rubbish is not your affair. I have a maid who deals with rubbish.

MISS RIVERTON: Yes, I see.

MS. ASQUITH: Your job is to see that my life runs smoothly and my appointments are kept. You are my secretary, not my housekeeper.

MISS RIVERTON: Assistant. Yes, of course.

MS. ASQUITH: You are not my assistant, Miss Riverton. You are my secretary.

MISS RIVERTON: All right.

MS. ASQUITH: I don't like to call something something else just because it's politically correct. A secretary is a perfectly fine thing to be.

MISS RIVERTON: But I do assist you.

MS. ASQUITH: Yes, you do. And so does a secretary.

MISS RIVERTON: But... isn't an assistant closer to what I do?

MS. ASQUITH: No, it isn't. It just uses the verb assist as a noun. You don't assist me in altering my clothes or cutting my hair or doing my nails. You assist me in the way a secretary does, a word that, you may be interested to know, originally meant desk.

MISS RIVERTON: Yes, I see.

MS. ASQUITH: Thank you. That will be all. (She rises, goes out, comes back.) Where am I going?

MISS RIVERTON: When?

MS. ASQUITH: Now.

MISS RIVERTON: Nowhere.

MS. ASQUITH: Nowhere? That's impossible. It's Friday night.

MISS RIVERTON: Yes, I know.

MS. ASQUITH: Well... how did this happen?

MISS RIVERTON: You had an engagement with Nelson Miles and then the Stradners invited you for a sail around East Hampton with Princess Agnelli and Ralph Lauren, so you canceled Mr. Miles. Then the Stradners canceled because of the weather and it was too late to get Mr. Miles back, so you placed a call to your son so you could invite him to dinner, but he told me he was going out of town with his father and stepmother on a long weekend to visit her parents' dairy farm. Then it was today.

MS. ASQUITH: You know. Miss Riverton, when you place a call for me, I would appreciate it if you didn't discuss the purpose of my call with the person I'm calling. You shouldn't have asked my son if he was free for dinner on Friday. I didn't ask you to do that.
MISS RIVERTON: Yes, but he said, "What does she want?"

MS. ASQUITH: It doesn't matter what he said. You should have said, "One moment and I'll put her on."

MISS RIVERTON: You were on another call.

MS. ASQUITH: It doesn't matter.

MISS RIVERTON: It's just that I thought you were busy.

MS. ASQUITH: I was busy. I am busy. I'm a busy woman. But it still doesn't matter. My son lives in a dorm. It takes time to get him on the phone. Time you save me by instituting... I'm not going to be made to feel guilty because I don't personally dial every member of my family.

MISS RIVERTON: I assure you I had no intention of making you feel guilty.

MS. ASQUITH: Well, I am guilty. So it doesn't take much.

MISS RIVERTON: I'm sorry. It's just...

(MISS RIVERTON breaks off.)

MS. ASQUITH: What?

MISS RIVERTON: Nothing, really. It's not important.

MS. ASQUITH: Miss Riverton, please finish your sentence. It drives me crazy when you do that. What? I want to know. What? (MISS RIVERTON shakes her head.) Oh, don't make me go through this. WHAT?

MISS RIVERTON: Well, it's just that your son... has said... a few times he's said... that... he's said that it's rude to call some-

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one and then make them wait while you—not you, anyone—come to the phone. It's like knocking at the door and then leaving a sign saying, "Back in a minute—stay right there."

MS. ASQUITH: (After a moment.) He's right.

MISS RIVERTON: He says no matter how fast someone gets there...

MS. ASQUITH: No, no, no, he's right, he's absolutely right. I do do that. All the time. No wonder I'm guilty. Of course, it would just cut my day in half if I dialed all those numbers and then had to wait for a secretary to answer and tell me whether or not someone could come to the phone... and half the time they couldn't... and then I had to leave a message that I called...

MISS RIVERTON: Perhaps if you just did it with family and close friends...

MS. ASQUITH: Yes. That's a good idea. Remind me to do that. Did he ask to talk to me? My son?

MISS RIVERTON: No. He said he knew you were busy.

MS. ASQUITH: (Sighs.) What a lousy week.

MISS RIVERTON: It has been complicated.

MS. ASQUITH: Awful. The worst. First the root canal and then this hideous haircut and then I got on the scale this morning and I'd gained three pounds—because I couldn't find my exercise elastic and I was just too irritated to work out. Thank God the mammogram turned out all right. I have to keep things in perspective.

MISS RIVERTON: I'm sorry about the elastic.
MISS RIVERTON: I was thinking about the exercise elastic. It's so awful to gain weight.

MS. ASQUITH: Forget the exercise elastic. The exercise elastic is past. The exercise elastic is just something to sustain me between sessions. The important thing is—what are we going to eat. (Looks at her watch.) It's too late to get into a really decent restaurant. Even for me. Oh, God. Can we order in?

MISS RIVERTON: Yes. What would you like.

MS. ASQUITH: I don't know. Pasta? Fish?


MISS RIVERTON: Nothing raw.

MS. ASQUITH: I'm afraid of parasites.

MISS RIVERTON: Well, would you like . . .

MS. ASQUITH: Don't ask me what I'd like. I'm no good at that. You pick it.

MISS RIVERTON: (Into phone.) Yes, I'd like to place an order—322 Madison Avenue . . .

MS. ASQUITH: Order shumai . . .

MISS RIVERTON: . . . The penthouse . . .

MS. ASQUITH: Ask if they have soft-shell crab.
MISS RIVERTON: ... Asquith Enterprises. Do you have soft-shell crab?...

MS. ASQUITH: Roll. Hand roll.

MISS RIVERTON: One soft-shell crab roll hand roll. One shumai.

MISS RIVERTON: ... one California roll ... two
shumai ... one
Manhattan roll—
three shumai ... and
three soft-shell crab
roll ... No, that's
two beside the last
one. Three all together.
Two shrimp
teriyaki. Another
California roll and
extra brown rice and saki.

(MISS RIVERTON hangs up.)

MS. ASQUITH: Perfect. Oh, yum. Get some plates and we'll set the desk... (Calling, as Miss Riverton runs off)... and I opened two excellent bottles of wine for lunch before that barbarian, Charles, said no alcohol—what assholes accountants are. Now... Let's see—where's the wine... the wine... Ah! Here it is. And two glasses.

(MISS RIVERTON comes back in carrying plates, napkins, and silverware and heads for the desk. MS. ASQUITH continues as she pours the wine.)

MS. ASQUITH: Oh, this is going to be such fun. Just like a picnic. Perhaps we should set the coffee table instead of the desk. More picnic-y.

(MISS RIVERTON stops and heads for the coffee table.)

MS. ASQUITH: But it's low.

(MISS RIVERTON stops again.)

MS. ASQUITH: Maybe the desk is better.

(MISS RIVERTON heads back for the desk.)

MS. ASQUITH: Oh, what if it is low. We'll sit on the floor. Here.

(MISS RIVERTON heads back to the coffee table.)

MS. ASQUITH: (Holding out a glass.) Just put the plates down anywhere and try some of this.

MISS RIVERTON: (Setting the plates on a chair.) Yes, Miss Asquith.

MS. ASQUITH: Perhaps you should call me Margaret for tonight. Well... perhaps not. (Holds out a glass.) Well, what shall we drink to?

MISS RIVERTON: To your having a wonderful time at Lincoln Center tomorrow night.

MS. ASQUITH: Lovely.

(They clink glasses and sip.)

MISS RIVERTON: Oh, this is good.

MS. ASQUITH: Isn't it? I'm glad you appreciate it. So many people have no understanding of wine.
MISS RIVERTON: I know. Long ago I made a pact with myself never to drink wine unless it was very, very good. This is excellent.

MS. ASQUITH: Really. That's fascinating. How did you develop such an interest in wine?

MISS RIVERTON: My father was French.

MS. ASQUITH: Ah. Enough said.

MISS RIVERTON: Oh, this is very good.

MS. ASQUITH: Hmm. So good. Such clarity.

MISS RIVERTON: And subtlety. The wine presents itself but not boldly. Delicately, innocently.

MS. ASQUITH: Well put. Very well put. (Pouring more wine.) I guess I'll be having a few additional sessions with my trainer next week.

MISS RIVERTON: May I suggest . . .

(She breaks off.)

MS. ASQUITH: Yes? Oh, please. Please finish your sentence. It just drives me up the wall when you do that. This is a social evening. All the rules are changed. You just say whatever comes into your mind.

MISS RIVERTON: Well, all I was going to say is—I wonder if your trainer does quite enough aerobic work with you.

MS. ASQUITH: You think I'm fat?

MISS RIVERTON: No, no. I'm just talking . . . healthwise, weight control-wise.

MS. ASQUITH: He does half an hour.

MISS RIVERTON: Well . . . sometimes not a full half hour. And is a half hour on the trampoline enough?

MS. ASQUITH: You don't approve of the trampoline?

MISS RIVERTON: Oh, I do. It's just that so much of the movement is momentum. Fast walking or jogging is much more effective.

MS. ASQUITH: How do you know so much about this?

MISS RIVERTON: I'm very interested in the body.

MS. ASQUITH: You're in wonderful shape.

MISS RIVERTON: Thank you. I'm very strong for a woman.

MS. ASQUITH: You look very strong.

MISS RIVERTON: Too strong?

MS. ASQUITH: Don't be silly. You can't look too strong. The appearance of strength is the appearance of power. Do you know the real difference between men and women, Miss Riverton? (MISS RIVERTON shakes her head.) Strength. Sheer physical strength. Do you know that there are male fish that actually change sex when a bigger fish comes along because only the biggest fish can be male. All the rest of the fish are his harem.

MISS RIVERTON: You're joking.
MS. ASQUITH: Absolutely not. And these fish have it down to such a science they don’t even have to fight—they just measure. The fish that seems most likely to inflict injury wins.

MISS RIVERTON: Well, it’s . . . it’s certainly . . . certainly a man’s world if you’re a fish, isn’t it?

MS. ASQUITH: That’s not my point, Miss Riverton. My point is that it’s not whether you’re a man or a woman that determines who’s world it is, it’s how strong you are that determines whether you’re a man or a woman. Metaphorically, of course.

MISS RIVERTON: Of course. I see. Well . . . I’m very strong.

MS. ASQUITH: Yes, I’ve seen you carry those file boxes. (Pours more wine.) You know, Miss Riverton—Jane—you’re the best secretary I’ve ever had. I can’t tell you the idiots I had to put up with until you came along. I don’t think I could get along without you, Jane.

MISS RIVERTON: Joan. Well . . . thank you. I try to do my job.

MS. ASQUITH: Joan? Oh, what a fool I am.

MISS RIVERTON: No, no, no.

MS. ASQUITH: This is so embarrassing.

MISS RIVERTON: Not at all.

MS. ASQUITH: To have had you as my secretary for so long and not know your first name.

MISS RIVERTON: Well, you don’t call me by my first name. And you were very close. Jane . . . Joan.

MS. ASQUITH: I’ll bet you know my first name.

MISS RIVERTON: Well, yes. But I make out all your checks and handle your mail.

MS. ASQUITH: There’s that. But no—that’s the easy way out. I don’t know your first name because I don’t notice anything. That’s a terrible failing of mine. I don’t really notice people unless they’re directly in my line of vision, part of what I’m focusing on. That was one of the reasons for my divorce. One day I handed my husband an envelope and said, “Mail this for me.” And he said, “Can’t your secretary mail it?” and I said, “Oh, I’m sorry, darling. I didn’t realize I was talking to you.”

MISS RIVERTON: That doesn’t seem so awful . . . I mean, awful enough for a divorce.

MS. ASQUITH: Well—it wasn’t just that . . . that discussion. It turned out he’d been very miserable for a very long time. But of course I didn’t notice. I’m very insensitive. And everyone has to forgive me. Until they don’t.

MISS RIVERTON: I think you’re wonderful.

MS. ASQUITH: Well . . . thank you, Joan. But it’s a shortcoming—being blind to others. Power in a relationship belongs to whoever wants to leave first—and you can’t anticipate that unless you notice the other person. The irony is that I wondered for years if I didn’t make a mistake marrying him, if I couldn’t have done better, if it wasn’t a waste of my time—all those vacations, and dinners, and preludes to sex. And the minute he said he wanted a divorce I realized that I loved him madly. Madly. And it was too late.

(There is a brief pause.)

MISS RIVERTON: Shall I get the other bottle of wine?
MS. ASQUITH: Yes. Thank you. (Watching Miss Riverton rise.) You know, Joan, I'm having just a wonderful time. I'm glad the Stradners canceled.

MISS RIVERTON: This is very pleasant.

MS. ASQUITH: So you're from France.

MISS RIVERTON: No. I'm from Michigan. My father was from France.

MS. ASQUITH: Michigan! I've heard so much about Michigan. We always went to Italy or the South of France. But I wish we'd gone to Michigan. It sounds lovely.

MISS RIVERTON: And I wish we'd gone to the South of France. Life is funny.

MS. ASQUITH: Very.

(MISS RIVERTON pulls the cork out of the second wine bottle with a pop.)

MISS RIVERTON: Good sound. That's very important. My father taught me that. He was a room service waiter in Cannes. He started the same year as the film festival.

MS. ASQUITH: How interesting.

MISS RIVERTON: It was all before I was born, of course.

MS. ASQUITH: Of course. That's when everything interesting happens.

MISS RIVERTON: But seeing the South of France and Italy... that must have been interesting...
MISS RIVERTON: Yes. That's right.

MS. ASQUITH: Wonderful story. Well, I can tell you I'm hungry.

MISS RIVERTON: It's a pretty boring story.

MS. ASQUITH: No, no. Not at all.

MISS RIVERTON: I've had a pretty boring life.

MS. ASQUITH: Nonsense. With a father who worked in Cannes and traveling from Michigan to New York...

MISS RIVERTON: When I was young I so wanted to be someone special.

MS. ASQUITH: Well, you are someone special.

MISS RIVERTON: I mean, you know, someone special, who everyone knows is special. I guess what I'm saying is I wanted to be famous.

MS. ASQUITH: Ah, well.

MISS RIVERTON: Because being famous is... like being immortal, isn't it?

MS. ASQUITH: Well—only if you're very famous for a very long time.

MISS RIVERTON: But you can be. Anyone can be. And I know how. You know how? You can kill someone famous. Of course, it has to be someone really famous and people have to be convinced that you're not part of a conspiracy. And meeting someone famous isn't so easy. When I was younger that's all I thought about—who can I kill who's famous and how

can I meet him. Probably I should have been thinking how can I meet who's famous and how can I kill him—but I was just a kid. (*She pours some wine.*) I thought of killing the president, but everyone who tries to kill the president is such a slug. I mean, I made a list of successful presidential assassins who still had some kind of stature, and you know who there is. Booth. Because he killed Lincoln. And where are you going to find another Lincoln? And—I don't know—it just seems like such a failure of imagination to go right to the president: kill someone famous—kill the president. Duh. Of course, Jack the Ripper is still famous and he just killed a lot of totally unknown prostitutes. But that may be because no one knows who he really is. And Charlie Manson is still famous and he just killed a starlet and some hairdressers. But who knows if he'll stand the test of time. I mean, you can easily kill someone and just be overlooked—unless you kill a lot of people, or kill a few people but in a really ghastly way—but it would have to be so ghastly.

MS. ASQUITH: You... you've given this a lot of thought.

MISS RIVERTON: I have. I mean, if there was another way—but I can't write a novel, I can't become a movie star, I can't invent a vaccine because I have no talent. Not that talent is any guarantee of fame, but with talent I'd have had a shot at it, an honest shot. And I'd have taken it. I didn't want an easy way out. I didn't want to resort to murder. But fame is fame. The important thing to me is not to... just pass through. To leave a mark. To change the world. To have people's consciousness enlarged to include me. And it wasn't for material gain, I didn't want to get rich. I wasn't going to live well from my crime. If I got caught I'd probably be electrocuted. So in a way, I would have been sacrificing my life for immortality—just like an artist or a scientist does. I would have been driven to kill not for the reward, but because there was nothing else I could do to fulfill myself—the same reason an artist creates.
My curse has always been that I'm a special person with no special ability.

MS. ASQUITH: Yes. That... is a problem.

MISS RIVERTON: And then, as the years passed, I realized how hard it is to meet someone famous and I thought maybe if I just killed someone rich and important or socially prominent. But by then I knew I was compromising. I was just after fame, not lasting fame. I told myself some fame is better than no fame (Shrugs, sighs.), and I was probably right.

MS. ASQUITH: Well... not... not necessarily. Lasting fame is... is by far... but why all this talk about fame. There's... there's so much more. To life. Than fame. There's... self-esteem, how well you've done with what you've had... love. Love is important.

MISS RIVERTON: That's just what Oprah said.

MS. ASQUITH: Did she? Well, she's a very wise woman in many ways.

MISS RIVERTON: She's very famous.

MS. ASQUITH: Yes, indeed.

MISS RIVERTON: She'd be a good one to kill.

MS. ASQUITH: Excellent. Yes. You'd want someone that famous.

MISS RIVERTON: Sometimes that backfires.

MS. ASQUITH: Hardly ever.

MISS RIVERTON: Oh, yes. The celebrity of the victim is so great it overshadows the assassin. That was the real triumph of Charles Manson. He killed people who were just rich and famous enough. That, of course, was what I didn't realize when I was a kid. I aimed too high.

MS. ASQUITH: You know, Joan—may I call you Joan?—

MISS RIVERTON: Of course, Miss Asquith.

MS. ASQUITH: Margaret, please. You know, Joan, things don't always work out as happily as they did for Charlie Manson. Sometimes there's a terrible murder and it's fun for a while and then people forget, or there's another, worse murder and they're distracted. And meanwhile, the poor murderer is imprisoned or electrocuted with no real reward for his crime. What was so important to him—or her—has been forgotten by everyone else. How far away is this restaurant you ordered from? Tokyo? Just joking. But it has been a long time since you ordered.

MISS RIVERTON: I've made you nervous, haven't I?


MISS RIVERTON: Yes, I have. I've ruined everything. We were having such a nice time, one of the nicest times I've ever had and I ruined it.

MS. ASQUITH: Nonsense. You've ruined nothing. Talking about murder is... just a little... always a little... edgy... but it's been such a long day... and I'm sure we're both... Would you like some music? Why don't I put on some music? (She rises.) That's interesting. I can't move my legs. I have no feeling from the waist down. Something very strange is happening to me...

MISS RIVERTON: Miss Asquith...
MS. ASQUITH: . . . It's as though somebody has put something in my food or drink . . .

MISS RIVERTON: Miss Asquith! You've had half a bottle of wine on an empty stomach. And I've had the other half. We're both going to feel strange.

MS. ASQUITH: Oh, yes. I forgot about the wine. How quickly the brain cells die. Now let's see—the music. (She stagers over to the remote, presses it, and "Night on Bald Mountain" blares out.) Wrong music. (She presses the button again. "Death and Transfiguration" comes on, then a Philip Glass piece.) Don't I have one fucking song in this whole stupid collection?

MISS RIVERTON: You asked me to get classical. You said it would serve the clients better.

MS. ASQUITH: Oh, of course. I was just talking to myself.

MISS RIVERTON: Oh, Miss Asquith, I think I should go. I've really upset you. Your hands are shaking.

MS. ASQUITH: Well, I haven't eaten and it's late . . . so you might want to go . . . because it's late. But you certainly shouldn't go because you think you've upset me.

MISS RIVERTON: You know, this was just a hypothetical discussion. It's not like I would really kill someone. I'm not like some madman who gets fired from the post office and shoots everyone for revenge. I have no reason to do anything bad to anyone.

MS. ASQUITH: That's right. And you never will.

MISS RIVERTON: I'm just this little secretary who makes thirty thousand a year and that's all I'll ever be. Because that's all I'm worth. I've accepted that.
MISS RIVERTON: I ... I wish I could be sure you’re not doing this because ... in some way ... I made you nervous. I would feel so awful if you were just being nice to me as ... a kind of ... out of fear.

MS. ASQUITH: Don’t be ridiculous. Do I seem to you to be the kind of person who would be intimidated into giving an employee a raise? And why would you make me nervous? Because when you were younger you wanted to kill someone famous? Hey! Who hasn’t wanted to ... pick up a gun and shoot a few famous people ... at one time or another ...

MISS RIVERTON: Actually, I was only going to shoot a man. If it was a woman I was going to stab her or strangle her. Weaker victim, lighter weapon.

MS. ASQUITH: So many rules. And so fair.

MISS RIVERTON: Oh, yes. Of course it’s risky to be fair. If you try to stab or strangle a woman and her strength is too close to yours she can inflict so much injury you won’t get the knife in. That’s one of the reasons I got so strong.

(The phone rings. MISS ASQUITH leaps up.)

MS. ASQUITH: I’ll get it. (Snatching up the phone.) Hello? ... Hi, Charles. How are you. Where are you? ... Martha’s Vineyard? What fun. ... Miss Riverton and I are just finishing the wine you wouldn’t let me drink this afternoon. We’re having dinner together. In the office. Just the two of us.

(There is the sound of a buzzer.)

MISS RIVERTON: That’ll be the food.

MS. ASQUITH: (Into phone.) And the deliveryman is here and Miss Riverton is just going out to get our food now. She’s walking out of the room ... she’s ... (As MISS RIVERTON exits. MS. ASQUITH whips up the remote and turns the music on again; then speaks softly under it.) Charles! Miss Riverton is psychotic. She just told me she wants to kill someone famous—but now she just wants to kill someone important to be famous—she’s just terrifying. ... No, no, no, I can’t fire her. She’s talking about the post office. I’d have to spend the rest of my life with a bodyguard. ... I want you to give her a raise. Give her a raise! She’s playing some kind of Machiavellian game with me, some kind of brilliant cat and mouse game, but I think I’m safe if I just do whatever she says ...

(She breaks off as MISS RIVERTON enters with the food.)

MS. ASQUITH: I have to hang up now, Charles. Miss Riverton is back and I don’t want to keep her waiting.

(MISS ASQUITH hangs up and clicks off the stereo. MISS RIVERTON begins unloading the food.)

MISS RIVERTON: We have everything! Everything we could ever want.

MS. ASQUITH: It smells very good.

MISS RIVERTON: This is so nice, isn’t it? I mean, this means so much to me. Well, I don’t want to embarrass you.

MS. ASQUITH: (Studying her.) No.

MISS RIVERTON: Here’s to a whole new ... what?

MS. ASQUITH: You name it.

MISS RIVERTON: Oh, I’m so bad with words.

MS. ASQUITH: I think you’re pretty good.
MISS RIVERTON: Well, thank you. (She looks up.) You're looking at me... so... so hard.

MS. ASQUITH: Well, you're in my line of vision.

MISS RIVERTON: Ballgame! Is that a good word?

MS. ASQUITH: Excellent. That's an excellent word. And now that you're in my line of vision... I begin to see... how very clever you are.

MISS RIVERTON: Careful—or I'll ask for that raise now.

MS. ASQUITH: How very, very clever. Miss Riverton, you're fascinating. This is fascinating. This is almost relaxing.

MISS RIVERTON: Is it?

MS. ASQUITH: Oh, yes. Because there's nothing I can do, is there?

MISS RIVERTON: I think... I'm not following you too well.

MS. ASQUITH: I mean once someone wants something more than life—they win. There's nothing you can threaten them with.

MISS RIVERTON: Like the Arabs who blow themselves up so they can go straight to paradise.

MS. ASQUITH: Yes. See? You are following me, after all. We all have our version of paradise, Miss Riverton. Yours is fame. And mine is to live. I'll do anything to live. So I lose.

MISS RIVERTON: Maybe you should eat something before you drink the saki.
MISS RIVERTON: Please don’t call me a bimbo, Miss Asquith. That really upsets me.

MS. ASQUITH: Well, what else can I call you when you suddenly sound like every chauffeur I’ve ever been to bed with. It just makes me wonder if you’re really as crazy as you pretend to be. Or as strong.

MISS RIVERTON: I don’t know what you’re talking about.

MS. ASQUITH: I’m talking about your strength, Miss Riverton, this strength with which you’re going to strangle or stab a woman. And I’m wondering if the idea of presenting yourself as strong didn’t come from my saying that the appearance of strength is power. And then... just building from there...

MISS RIVERTON: I’m not presenting myself as anything. (Rising) I’m not a bimbo. And I’m very strong.

MS. ASQUITH: As strong as I am?

MISS RIVERTON: As strong as you are? (She laughs.) Oh, I think so!

MS. ASQUITH: But you also think Dostoyevsky is Stalin, so your opinions aren’t as informed as they might be.

MISS RIVERTON: You saw me carry the file boxes.

MS. ASQUITH: No, I didn’t.

MISS RIVERTON: You said you did.

MS. ASQUITH: I lied.

MISS RIVERTON: Well... I carried them.

MS. ASQUITH: Really? So did I.

MISS RIVERTON: You carried file boxes?

MS. ASQUITH: Yes.

MISS RIVERTON: How many.

MS. ASQUITH: How many did you carry?

MISS RIVERTON: When?

MS. ASQUITH: Any time. The time you carried the most.

MISS RIVERTON: Six.

MS. ASQUITH: So did I.

MISS RIVERTON: You carried six file boxes?

MS. ASQUITH: Absolutely.

(MISS RIVERTON studies her for several moments... then drops to the floor.)

MISS RIVERTON: Can you do this?

(MISS RIVERTON does several marine push-ups.)

MS. ASQUITH: Yes.

MISS RIVERTON: Let’s see.

MS. ASQUITH: Take my word for it.

MISS RIVERTON: You can’t, can you? I’ll bet you don’t have the strength to do even one.
MS. ASQUITH: Sheer physical strength isn't that necessary, Miss Riverton. Will counts, too.

MISS RIVERTON: No, it doesn't. Because a strong person can make a weak person do something against his will. He can destroy a weak person's will by using physical force. And then the weak person is always in his power.

MS. ASQUITH: Isn't that just a wee bit dramatic for what is, essentially, a push-up contest?

MISS RIVERTON: Get down on the ground and try a push-up, Miss Asquith. I challenge you.

MS. ASQUITH: I don't accept challenges. It would mean I have something to prove.

MISS RIVERTON: You'll accept this one. It's time for us to measure. (Taking a step toward her) I'm afraid I have to insist.

(MISS RIVERTON takes another step.)

MS. ASQUITH: (Quickly) Well, if it's that important to you . . .

(MISS ASQUITH gets slowly down, brushes away some dust on the rug, sits back up.)

MISS RIVERTON: See? You can't do it. But don't give up trying. Keep using that will of yours. You see? . . . (She picks up the exercise rubber) This is trash. I put it right where it belongs. In the trash basket. It doesn't do anything. It doesn't make you strong. It's just a toy that gives you the illusion of strength—a personal trainer's silly invention for silly rich women. You know what makes you strong? Carrying file boxes, climbing three flights of stairs to a walk-up so you can afford to live in Manhattan, lugging groceries, walking miles to save money on subways, doing your own housework, wheeling your mother around when you visit her because you can't afford a nurse, painting your own ceiling, fixing your own pipes because the plumber costs so much. Hard, terrible labor—that's what makes you strong. And it's insane to think that God would create the world so lopsided that a multimillionaire who hires a trainer to get her little hour of physical labor would be as strong as someone who actually . . .

(MISS RIVERTON breaks off as MS. ASQUITH suddenly rises up in a marine push-up . . . and then another . . . and then another . . . and then another.)

MS. ASQUITH: You're right! It's not will. But it is that personal trainer. And I've been skipping sessions. (Excitedly) It would be very hard to get that knife in me, Miss Riverton, I'd inflict a lot of damage—if you were looking for a victim, I mean. You'd have to stab me in the back and break your rules—and I know you wouldn't do that. You see, Jane, I'm afraid God did create a lopsided world. In that way he's very much like Tito. (MISS RIVERTON turns away.) Well now, don't cry. That's no way to end a contest. Don't cry. It's not so bad. Although that walk-up doesn't sound wonderful. But look at those leg muscles. Oh, that food smells so good. (She sits down and puts the sofa; MISS RIVERTON rises obediently and sits down beside her.) Think of it this way. Everything's just the same as it was this morning. And you weren't crying then. Now let's have our picnic, shall we? It's getting late. And get my exercise elastic out of the trash.

MISS RIVERTON: You're not going to fire me?

MS. ASQUITH: Never. You're going to be the reason I stay in shape.

END OF PLAY