

## CHAPTER IV

SUMMER AND SMOKE

Summer and Smoke tells the story of a boy and girl who live next door to each other, yet are separated by vast distances of attitudinal differences. Alma is an idealistic girl hungering for the spirit, and John is a wild young man hungering for the flesh. They think differently, for they were brought up differently. Alma, the daughter of a clergyman, has been brought up rather strictly, while John, the son of a medical doctor, has had little parental supervision, his mother having died when he was very small. Alma's mother behaves like a spoiled child, and the daughter has more than her share of responsibility in the home.

Alma is described in the Prologue as having " a quality of extraordinary delicacy and tenderness or spirituality in her, which must set her distinctly apart from other children." Although she is, at the start of the play, only ten years old, she looks older. Her love for John and her concern for him have been obvious since she was a child. She has always worried about his well-being, his appearance, and his happiness. She once gave him a box of handkerchiefs when she noticed that he had a running nose. Instead of handing it to him, she put

it in his desk at school. John became embarrassed when he opened it in front of the other pupils. He became angry and, guessing who the donor might be, reproached Alma. She, of course, was disappointed by his misunderstanding. She tried to explain:

Alma [in a shy trembling voice]: I'm sorry that you were embarrassed. I honestly am awfully sorry that you were embarrassed. Because I wouldn't embarrass you for the world!

John: Don't flatter yourself that I was embarrassed. I don't embarrass that easy.

Alma: It was stupid and cruel of those girls to laugh. . . . They should all realize that you don't have a mother to take care of such things for you. It was a pleasure to me to be able to do something for you, only I didn't want you to know it was me who did it.<sup>42</sup>

John did not appreciate her attentions. He returned her concern for him by throwing away the handkerchiefs and mocking her.

John continues his mockery of Alma's seriousness after they have grown up. At a town Fourth of July celebration, he frightens her by tossing a firecracker close to her. He hurts her feelings by imitating the way she speaks and telling her that he has heard people make fun of her.

Alma: You threw that firecracker and started a conversation just in order to tease me as you did as a child. You came to this bench in order to embarrass me and to hurt my feelings with the report of that vicious - imitation! No, let go of my hand so I can leave now. You've succeeded in your purpose. I was hurt, I did

make a fool of myself as you intended! So let me go now!<sup>43</sup>

Alma's mother gossips with one of Alma's voice pupils about Alma's fondness for John:

Mrs. Winemiller: . . . Show Nellie how you spy on him! Oh, she's a good one at spying. She stands behind the curtain and peeks around it, and . . . Whenever he comes in at night she rushes downstairs to watch him out of this window! . . . She called him just now and had a fit on the telephone! . . . Alma's in love! Alma's in love!<sup>44</sup>

Alma has tried to conceal her love for John but her mother, perverse as she is, reveals the truth intentionally. Naturally, Alma is upset. She addresses her mother:

. . . You act like a child, but you have the devil in you. And God will punish you - yes! I'll punish you too. I'll take your cigarettes from you and give you no more. I'll give you no ice cream either. Because I'm tired of your malice and your self-indulgence. People wonder why I'm tied down here! They pity me - think of me as an old maid already! In spite of I'm young. Still young! It's you - it's you, you've taken my youth away from me! I wouldn't say that - I'd try not even to think it - if you were just kind, just simple! But I could spread my life out like a rug for you to step on and you'd step on it, and not even say "Thank you, Alma!" Which is what you've done always - and now you dare to tell a disgusting lie about me - in front of that girl!<sup>45</sup>

Alma cannot seek sympathy or consolation from her mother or her father, the latter being too occupied with his religious services. She has to cope with her problems by herself. She is in love with John, but her love is unrequited. John is sympathetic, but that is all, when Alma confesses her feelings for him.

Alma: . . . I suppose I am sick, one of those weak and divided people who slip like shadows among you solid strong ones. But sometimes, out of necessity, we shadowy people take on a strength of our own. I have that now. You needn't try to deceive me. . . . It's no longer a secret that I love you. It never was. I loved you as long ago as the time I asked you to read the stone angel's name with your fingers. Yes, I remember the long afternoons of our childhood, when I had to stay indoors to practice my music - and heard your playmates calling you, "Johnny, Johnny!" How it went through me, just to hear your name called! And how I - rushed to the window to watch you jump the porch railing! I stood at a distance, halfway down the block, only to keep in sight of your torn red sweater, racing about the vacant lot you played in. Yes, it had begun that early, this affliction of love, and has never let go of me since, but kept on growing. I've lived next door to you all the days of my life, a weak and divided person who stood in adoring awe of your singleness, of your strength. And that is my story! Now I wish you would tell me - why didn't it happen between us? Why did I fail? Why did you come almost close enough - and no closer?<sup>46</sup>

Alma claims to have attacks of "nervous heart trouble," but when John has checked her heart beat, he speaks plainly.

Alma: What do you hear?

John! Just a little voice saying - "Miss Alma is lonesome!"

He recognizes her plight and says she is "worth a lot of consideration. . . . Because you have a lot of feeling in your heart, and that's a rare thing. It makes you too easily hurt. . . ." <sup>47</sup>

Alma cannot replace John with other men. She tells John about it:

Alma: . . . I've only gone out with three young men at all seriously, and with each one there was a desert between us.

John: What do you mean by a desert?

Alma: Oh - wide stretches of uninhabitable ground. . . . I - I didn't have my heart in it. . . . A silence would fall between us. You know, a silence? . . . I'd try to talk and he'd try to talk and neither would make a go of it.

John: The silence would fall?

Alma: Yes, the enormous silence.<sup>48</sup>

By the end of the play, Alma and John have exchanged their points of view towards life. He has taken up his father's work at the fever clinic and returns home with honours for having got rid of an epidemic. He seems to have a new sense of responsibility and he feels that he has settled with life on fair terms. Alma, learning of this change, recalls his diagnosing her malady as a "doppleganger." That meant, she learned from the dictionary, that she had another person inside her. She now recalls the scene at Moon Lake Casino, where she had repulsed John's desire for her, and she tells John:

Onetime I said "no" to something. . . . But now I have changed my mind, or the girl who said "no," she doesn't exist any more, she died last summer - suffocated in smoke from something on fire inside her. No, she doesn't live now, but she left me her ring - you see? This one you admired, the topaz ring set in

pearls. . . . And she said to me when she slipped this ring on my finger - "Remember I died empty-handed, and make sure that your hands always have something in them!" [She drops her gloves. She clasps his head again in her hands.] I said, "But what about pride?" - She said, "Forget about pride whenever it stands between you and what you must have!" [He takes hold of her wrists.] And then I said, "But what if he doesn't want me?" I don't know what she said then. I'm not sure whether she said anything or not - her lips stopped moving - yes, I think she stopped breathing! [He gently removes her craving hands from his face.] No? [He shakes his head in dumb suffering.] Then the answer is "no"!<sup>49</sup>

John admits that Alma has now won the argument that they had between them the last time, about the anatomy of the human body. He says:

I've come around to your way of thinking, that something else is in there, an immaterials something - as thin as smoke - which all of those ugly machines combine to produce and that's their whole reason for being. It can't be seen so it can't be shown on the chart. But it's there, just the same, and knowing it's there - why, then the whole thing - this - this unfathomable experience of ours - takes on a new value, like some wildly romantic work in a laboratory! Don't you see? . . . it wasn't the physical you that I really wanted! . . . You had something else to give. . . . You couldn't name it and I couldn't recognize it. I thought it was just a Puritanical ice that glittered like flame. But now I believe it was flame, mistaken for ice. . . .<sup>50</sup>

Before leaving John, Alma puts into words her recognition of the irony of her position.

. . . The tables have turned, yes, the tables have turned with a vengeance! You've come around to my old way of thinking and I to yours like two people exchanging a call on each other at the same time, and each one finding the other one gone out, the door locked against him and no one to answer the bell! . . . I came here to tell you that being a gentleman, doesn't seem so important to me any more, but you're telling me I've got to remain a lady. . . . The tables have turned with a vengeance!<sup>51</sup>

She is brave when she admires Nellie's engagement ring and listens to her pupil boast of her betrothal to John, but she voices her awareness of her continuing solitary state: "Oh, what a lovely, lovely solitaire! But solitaire is such a wrong name for it. Solitaire means single and this means two! It's blinding, Nellie! Why it . . . hurts my eyes!" Her face is bathed in tears.<sup>52</sup>

At the opening of the final scene of the play, Alma is standing near the angel of the fountain. She takes a small white package from her pocketbook and starts to unwrap it. She puts the package back into her purse and addresses a young man who has come up, wearing a checked suit and a derby. She gathers confidence before the awkwardness of his youth, and finds out that he is a travelling salesman. [Alma leans back and looks at him under half-closed lids, perhaps a little suggestively.] She says, "The life of a traveling salesman is interesting . . . but lonely." He

agrees, adding that "Hotel bedrooms are lonely." Alma replies, "All rooms are lonely where there is only one person." She is relaxed because she has taken one of her sleeping tablets. She gives the young man one, too. She tells him that the tablets are "infinitely merciful." "Life is full of little mercies like that, not big mercies but comfortable little mercies. And so we are able to keep on going. . . ."55

As the play ends, Alma and the salesman are headed for Moon Lake Casino, where things are "Gay, very gay, . . . ." It is easy to imagine Alma keeping on going with the aid of drugs and casual romances, in the pattern of other Williams heroines.