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Dramatic Publishing

TINKER AUTUMN

by

WIL DENSON



The Dramatic Publishing Company

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(TINKER AUTUMN)

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TINKER AUTUMN

**A Full Length Play in One Act
For Two Women and Four Men**

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

CAITLIN MORAN	.....	12, an adolescent girl
PETER CRICHTON	.....	13, an orphan boy
MARTIN RAMSEY	.....	50, the Sheriff
CONOR MORAN	.....	45, Caitlin's father
ALFRED FORSYTHE	.....	40, Child Welfare Board worker
MARGARET DANIELS	.....	35, Child Welfare Board worker

TIME: The present.

PLACE: Rural America.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

CAITLIN MORAN: Age 12, skinny, red-headed, angular, energetic, easily enraged. A tinker's daughter who has traveled the U.S. back roads from county fair to county fair. She's changing from carefree, happy child as she heads into adolescence. She's afraid because she can't read (she's never been to school) – afraid of being laughed at; afraid she is ugly, a freak.

PETER CRICHTON: Age 13, tall, thin, serious, working class, living on the edge of terror. He wears glasses and cleans them endlessly, when he's frightened. He has hidden in a treehouse nearby for several weeks fleeing the Child Welfare Board's taking him into custody as an orphaned minor and sending him to live with relatives, without consulting him.

SHERIFF MARTIN RAMSEY: Age 50, ample, uniformed, aggressive, energetic, formidable to a young adolescent.

CONOR MORAN: A tinker, 45, Caitlin's father, paripatetic, short-to-medium height, shabbily dressed, hint of a brogue, tired. He shines within, something free, something singing. It shows in his eyes, walk, the tilt of his dented hat. Something tells us we like him.

ALFRED FORSYTHE: 40, by the book in his three-piece suit. He works for the Child Welfare Board.

MARGARET DANIELS: Mid-thirties, stern, spare, dried out too soon. Also employed by the Child Welfare Board. She is dressed for the office, not the woods.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

SCENE ONE: Night. Peter Crichton is running, pursued by Sheriff Ramsey for breaking and entering a grocery at night for food. He seeks refuge at a homemade cabin-trailer, parked in a woodland clearing. Caitlin Moran emerges from the trailer to meet Peter and spontaneously hides him until the Sheriff gives up in disgust — then confronts him. She's proud and free; he's scared and hiding. Suspicious, but concerned for his plight, Caitlin agrees to buy him food. Caitlin establishes herself as dominant, but scared and self-protective. Peter emerges as frightened but courageous.

SCENE TWO: Early morning. Conor Moran returns from fairgrounds to Caitlin and their trailer. He lost their truck betting on a trotter, while trying to win money to buy a place on the midway for their "fix-it" trailer. With future uncertain and dead tired, he retires to sleep. Albert Forsythe and Margaret Daniels from Child Welfare Board appear. They want to question Conor about his daughter's lack of education, and to place her in a school. Caitlin, suspicious, waylays them, but a confrontation builds. Peter drives them away by hurling acorns at them from his hiding place offstage. An alliance is building between the two youngsters. With the woods to themselves again, Peter and Caitlin begin to reveal to each other their situations: He fears deportation to Chicago; she fears humiliation for her "ignorance" and lack of schooling. Scene concludes as together they begin trek for Peter's groceries.

SCENE THREE: Later that morning, Sheriff Ramsey is chasing Peter from the store again. Peter's a minor, so his former parents' land is to be sold at Sheriff's auction. Ramsey lets slip to Conor that papers are being prepared to take Caitlin from him, for unfitness as a parent, to place her in a foster home and send her to school. As Ramsey casually insults Conor for being a beggar and a thief, Caitlin unexpectedly and furiously attacks Sheriff Ramsey with a carpetbag; frantic but not dangerous. Sheriff leaves, but Conor is defeated, feels bad about his poverty, poor education of Caitlin. He's ready to let them try to give her a "normal" life. Caitlin decides to run away; Peter stops her. They struggle for a solution.

SCENE FOUR: The next day, Conor, Peter and Caitlin stage a confrontation with Sheriff and Child Welfare. By visiting the judge they have arranged for Conor to adopt Peter and become caretaker of his parents' farmland. That solves Peter's dilemma, and Conor's, but Caitlin still has to enter school. As all struggle over her welfare, Caitlin emerges from the trailer dressed as a "young woman" for the first time. Her angry outbursts have blown their course, and in their wake she has decided to go to school. Her decision is stiff and stilted, but filled with dignity. She has come of age.

TINKER AUTUMN

SCENE: Night. Quiet. But bright. Moonlit. Crickets. We are in a clearing in a small woods; a stump or two, perhaps woodwings and foliage borders, maybe a forest backdrop, a few mossy boulders. But the details of the clearing are largely icing, for what dominates the stage is the wagon. Caught frozen in the bright moonlight the wagon is a thing of mystery, a springboard to all things exciting. Silhouetted in night it seems almost magical. Under more revealing, less flattering conditions, however, the wagon is also just a wagon, a trailer, and probably homemade at that. It looks a bit worn, tired, perhaps an ancient slope-backed plywood house trailer that someone has tinkered with and made semi-livable. There are attached wooden steps leading to a side screen door. A curtained window. A tin chimney topped by a cone-shaped rain cover. But the wagon is rescued from the totally commonplace by a series of unique details. Decorating the wagon's exterior are all of the necessary implements for cooking, tin-smithing and living in general. There is a flower-filled window box and an assortment of hanging pots and pans on display to be sold; there are hinged swing-out tables and stools; there are the tools and implements and utensils a craftsman might need. There are the patents and devices and inventions that a fertile mind and a skilled hand might devise to make life in a tired trailer livable and

even convenient. Rolling magic or mobile junk, it is all point of view.

Stillness. Then a pine cone sails out of the blackness and rattles the pot-and-pan armor of the wagon. Another. No response from within, so another. The door to the wagon flies open and CAITLIN MORAN pours furiously out of the wagon and onto the ground.

CAITLIN (*fists clenched, scanning the dark*). Conor?!
Conor, is that you?! (*We see her only dimly in the moonlight, but we sense that CAITLIN is dressed in less-than-spotless Levis, sweatshirt, and tennis shoes. She stands with feet wide apart scanning the darkness, spoiling for a scrap.*) You're not funny, Conor! Two in the morning isn't funny. Nobody's laughing. (*Another pine cone, this one actually hitting her, or nearly so. With an exclamation CAITLIN scoops up a fistful of stones and hurls them one after another in the general direction of the incoming missile, punctuating each word with a throw.*) Conor!...you!...rotten!...bugger! (*She's good. She means it. An exclamation from OFF. Victorious, she throws again.*) Huh!

PETER (*OFF*). Hey! Stop it! What're you doing?

CAITLIN. Whata you – (*She throws.*) – think!

PETER (*OFF*). Cut it out! What're you trying to do?

CAITLIN (*one more barrage*). I'm!...trying!...to! – (*Stopping.*) Conor? Is that you?

PETER (*angry himself by now*). No! No, it's not! It's me!
Now stop throwing those rocks!

CAITLIN (*a bark*). Huh! Who me?? Who's there? Who are you?

(PETER CRICHTON steps into the clearing. He and CAITLIN stand eyeing each other. PETER wears khakis and a long-sleeved sport shirt that probably looked better a few weeks ago. The khakis are somewhat large and gather at the waist. He either wears wire-rims or carries them.)

PETER. Me.

CAITLIN *(after a moment—an accusation)*. You're not Conor.

PETER. No, of course not. I never said I was. Are you crazy or something? You could have hit me. Could have busted my glasses.

CAITLIN. I still could.

PETER. What—what are you throwing rocks at me for?

CAITLIN. 'Cause you were throwing them at me.

PETER. I wasn't throwing rocks, I was throwing pine cones. And I wasn't throwing them at you, I was throwing them at your trailer or wagon or whatever that thing is. You could've hurt somebody.

CAITLIN *(with some grandness)*. It's a mobile home.

PETER. Okay. Whatever. Anyway I wasn't—

CAITLIN. It's a mobile home. *(On the attack again.)* Well, you almost hit me. That's why I was throwing at you. Anyway, I thought you were—somebody else...

PETER. Who?

CAITLIN. None of your business. Just—somebody. You can't throw much, can you?

PETER. What? What are you talking about? Throw *pine cones*?? Nobody can throw pine cones, they don't carry. I wasn't trying to kill somebody, I was trying to— Anyway, we weren't talking about—

CAITLIN. Can you?

PETER (*trying to stick to the subject*). —we were talking about who you were waiting—

CAITLIN. Can you?

PETER. All right! No. I can't throw very well. Are you satisfied? So what?

CAITLIN (*shrugging, too off-handedly*). Nothing. No big deal I guess. If you can't you can't. Neither was I trying to kill somebody.

PETER. It sure seemed like it to me. Anyway, games are stupid. Who wants to spend their whole life trying to learn how to throw things. Stupid waste of time. Who *are* you?

CAITLIN. Who're *you*?

PETER. There you go again. What's the matter with you? Are you always looking for a fight? Can't you ever just answer? You don't answer a question with another question. How old *are* you anyway?

CAITLIN. How old *are you*?

PETER (*a terribly exasperated sigh*). Okay. My name is Peter Crichton; I was throwing pine cones to see if there was anybody inside; I'm thirteen. Okay? And that wagon—mobile home of yours is standing—

RAMSEY (*OFF, on a bull horn; metallic, loud*). You! In the clearing! I know you're there! Do not move! Do not attempt to leave the clearing!

PETER. Ohhhhh! Oh, no! (*Both PETER and CAITLIN are startled by the booming voice, but PETER is absolutely galvanized. He looks about desperately for a place to hide; he runs a short distance, stops, looks about frantically, starts off in another direction.*)

CAITLIN (*going to him; quickly; taking over*). Here! C'mon! Under the wagon! Quick!

PETER. No! That's the first place he'll—

CAITLIN (*physically forcing him*). C'mon! Under the wagon! Move!

(CAITLIN watches coolly but poised, alert, as PETER scrambles out of sight under the wagon, then she crosses quickly to the wooden steps, pounds up them with deliberate noise, opens the door, pauses for just the right amount of time, slams the door shut, jumps noiselessly to the ground and slithers out of sight under the wagon. CAITLIN barely escapes under the wagon when SHERIFF MARTIN RAMSEY bursts angrily into the clearing. He is in full uniform and carries a police bull horn. He pauses for an instant, out of breath, listening hard. He spots the wagon.)

RAMSEY (*to himself*). Ha! (*He moves quickly, triumphantly, to the wagon, sets himself, then pounds rattlingly on the screen door.*) You! Come out of there! I heard you go in! I know you're in there! Come out! (*He steps back from the door fully expecting his prey to walk into his arms. He waits.*) Come out of there, I said! Come out or I'm coming in after you! I know you're in there, I heard you! (*Still no one responds. Ominously, to himself, hiking up his belt and going in.*) All right then, we'll just see. (*Boldly he stamps up the steps, throws open the wagon door, enters, and moves out of sight. The wagon sways and creaks a bit as he conducts a banging, clattering search. Then he appears again very abruptly at the door as if expecting to catch someone fleeing across the clearing.*) Ha! (*He holds for an instant in the doorway. Coming down a step; loudly; to the whole woods.*) Crichton? You listening? You're out there, I know you are. I know you can hear me. Well, this is no game any-

more. You're just making things worse by running. You hear me, Crichton? We're not playing now! This isn't some...*(He pauses, realizing how foolish he must look; then to himself, exiting.)* Ahhhhh...*(After a moment CAITLIN and PETER crawl quietly out from under the wagon. PETER holds near the hiding place as CAITLIN crosses a few steps toward where RAMSEY exited, making sure he's really gone. They listen. Nothing.)*

PETER. He gone?

CAITLIN. Think so.

PETER *(awkwardly)*. Thank you.

CAITLIN. Welcome.

PETER. I—suppose you want to know who he was.

CAITLIN *(shrugging)*. None of my business. If you want. Who?

PETER. It was Sheriff Ramsey.

CAITLIN. Sheriff?

PETER. County Sheriff.

CAITLIN *(a non-committal noise)*. Huh. He was sure mad.

PETER. Yeah. I guess so.

CAITLIN. I guess so too, Why's he after you?

PETER. Who knows. He chases everybody. He's crazy.

CAITLIN *(nodding)*. Sure. Right, crazy. That's how he knew you were here.

PETER. He didn't *know*. Anything.

CAITLIN. Knew your name.

PETER. He was just guessing! He didn't *know*—He—thinks I've been stealing from this store—grocery store. Somebody must've told him they saw me or something.

CAITLIN. Oh.

PETER (*beginning to clean his glasses*). What do you mean, "Oh"? I haven't been. I didn't steal anything. In case you're at all interested. I always left money on the counter. More than the junk was worth.

CAITLIN. Right. Won't make any difference anyway I don't guess. You been breaking in, he's got you no matter what.

PETER. I didn't "break in," I found a window that didn't lock. I didn't *break* anything.

CAITLIN. Same thing. Almost. What kind of stuff you take?

PETER. Food. Just—food.

CAITLIN. Oh. Oh, I thought you...Oh. Food, that's different.

PETER. You thought what?

CAITLIN. Nothing. I thought you were, you know, *stealing* stealing.

PETER. And *that* would have been all right, right?

CAITLIN. No. It wouldn't. I wouldn't have trusted you then if you really want to know.

PETER. Oh. Well, he was right I guess. I really did take the stuff. Canned peaches mostly. But I always paid.

CAITLIN. You said. Hungry, huh.

PETER. I ran out the day before yesterday. I *knew* I shouldn't go back there again tonight, I *knew* it. Seven always was my unlucky number. I *knew* he'd be waiting. (*Working hard at the glasses again.*) Darn glasses!

CAITLIN. Seven! You snuck in the same place seven times?!

PETER. Well, six. I don't think you can count tonight. I didn't even get one foot on the floor when he came after me. He must have been hiding behind the counter someplace.

CAITLIN. He was waiting *inside* the place? In the dark? With his gun? He take his gun out? Ha! Wish I'd been there! He come out the window after you or what? How'd you get away?

PETER (*shrugging; irritated and surprised at her level of fascination with such things*). Who knows? I ran I guess. I don't remember. You can run pretty fast when you're that scared.

CAITLIN. You were scared of him?

PETER. Well, 'course I was. What, am I supposed to lie about it? 'Course I was scared, I'm not crazy.

CAITLIN. Right. (*And abruptly CAITLIN turns and moves away. She stands, not looking at him. Something has changed. Radically. Close to an accusation.*) You haven't had anything since day before yesterday, huh?!

PETER (*shrugging*). Not much. Some berries I found.

CAITLIN (*suddenly, unaccountably, angry*). Well, it was stupid! What'd you expect!

PETER. What...?

CAITLIN. Stupidest thing I ever heard of! He was bound to be waiting. Seven times!

PETER (*watching her, mystified*). Well, yes, I—guess so. Anyway he was.

CAITLIN (*throwing rocks again*). Stupid!...Just stupid!

PETER. What are you so mad about?

CAITLIN. I'm not — (*She throws furiously.*) — mad!

PETER. Oh.

CAITLIN. That's stupid! I'm not mad! Why should I be mad? (*She crosses and throws herself down on the wagon steps; a pause.*) We don't have anything here, you know.

PETER. What? "Anything"? What are you...

CAITLIN. To eat—to eat—to eat! What are we talking about? To eat! We don't have anything. No food. Peanut butter and crackers. That's it.

PETER. To eat? What are you...? I didn't ask for anything to eat.

CAITLIN. Well, we don't *have* anything. Nothing. Zip. Peanut butter and crackers. That's it, that's all. Take it or leave it.

PETER. What're you...? What's the matter with you? You crazy or something? Boy, you sure know how to make me mad. That's not what I came here for. I didn't come for some handout. Is that what you thought? That I came for some handout? Is it?

CAITLIN. Well, didn't you?

PETER. No. I didn't.

CAITLIN. Oh. Well. Okay. Okay then. I'm sorry. I was wrong. Then why?

PETER (*taking off his glasses; turning away*). I—don't know. I can't remember. I forgot.

CAITLIN. What?!

PETER. You heard. I forgot. I can't remember.

CAITLIN. Well, *that's* the stupidest—Come on, why? Really? Why'd you come? Why were you throwing rocks at the wagon?

PETER (*for the last time*). I *wasn't* throwing rocks, I was throwing—(*Furiously cleaning his glasses.*) I was trying to get somebody's attention. I came to get somebody to—help me. If I could.

CAITLIN. Oh...

PETER. Yeah, "oh." So now you know. I had to do—something. I don't think I can go another day on just berries.

CAITLIN. Oh.

PETER. I'm not asking for some stupid handout. I have money. Only I can't—spend it is all. I just need somebody to go to the grocery store and buy some things for me. That's why.

CAITLIN. With your money.

PETER. Yes. Some canned peaches and things. I'll give you the money and first thing tomorrow you go and get me some—peaches and things.

CAITLIN. You're not making much sense, you know.

PETER. No, maybe not. But I can't go back there.

CAITLIN. Why not someplace else then? You don't have to go *there*, you know. Stores sell stuff, you know; that's what they're there for.

PETER. I can't go *anyplace*. Not around here. Not anyplace at all. I—can't tell you why. Not yet.

CAITLIN. Oh.

PETER. I don't suppose you'll do it though.

CAITLIN. Sure I will. Why not.

PETER. Not after you saw the Sheriff trying to—You will?

CAITLIN. Sure.

PETER. Oh. Well, thank you. I didn't think you'd—Thank you. (*Imagining what she must be thinking.*) I didn't *do* anything or anything. Really. I mean you can trust me. I just can't be—seen around here is all. You'll—you'll do it?

CAITLIN. Sure. Listen, I think they're probably clean.

PETER. What...?

CAITLIN. Your glasses. They should be clean by now. You been rubbing them for about two hours.

PETER (*putting the specs back on*). Oh my—Yeah. I do that when I'm, you know, nervous or something. Stupid.