

In front of the United Cigar Store on a rainy Sunday morning, the Cherokee wooden Indian stood, adorned with water and oblivious to the sounds of the church bells chiming a cacophony of faiths. The carnival was approaching, alive with vibrant drums and the strange sounds of a calliope, drawing curious children and spectators who flowed out of the churches, eager for the festivities. The wooden Indian remained unaffected, its tomahawk's shadow casting on an iron grille embedded in the sidewalk, where countless passersby had dropped gum wrappers, cigarette butts, and lost pennies over the years.

Amidst the parade's vibrant display, beneath the cigar store's sidewalk grille, two boys, Jim and Will, crouched close together, hidden from the world above. Their excitement building, Jim urged Will to join the spectacle outside, but Will held firm, insisting on staying hidden, believing it was the safest choice. They heard the rhythmic sounds of the parade above, feeling the vibrations through the grille as feet pounded the sidewalk in celebration.

Suddenly, a man's shoe struck the grille. Will's heart raced as he recognized his dad above, searching near them. He was torn between reaching out and the fear of being discovered. A child above dropped a piece of bubble gum, and as he knelt to peer into the grille, Will felt an urge to return the gum to the boy, longing for a simple connection amid the chaos. Nervously, Jim and Will exchanged glances, sensing the parade had unexpectedly halted.

The atmosphere shifted, Mr. Dark—the Illustrated Man—glanced back at the chaos of the parade, his collection of freaks and performers dispersing among the crowd, handing out fliers with a predatory glint in their eyes. As Will felt the shadow of the small boy behind him, he realized the parade had ended, and a new search began. The innocent moment of the boy pointing down through the grille shattered their hidden world, signaling a shift from playful revelry to the imminent tension of being discovered.