



Around quarter to ten the morning coffee rush starts. The first ones in are the eager seconds-in-command from Woolworth's and Eaton's across the street. They started work at eight and this is their first break for a cigarette and coffee. They're quick, no more than 15 minutes. They might have a butterhorn or sugar doughnut but usually they just have time for a smoke. They gulp their coffee and twist and turn on the rotary stools at the counter as they compare jobs and potential seasonal parties.

The main morning action in the cafe, however, is in the large oval booth at the back with the "nickel millionaires." Some mornings there might be eight, ten of the high-muck-a-muck store owners and insurance salesmen pow-wow town power. They complain about the mayor and the highways department, they compare curling scores, and they talk business and service club and hockey and the high cost of freight — and Fred plays "timber" with them.

They start out betting just for coffee but no one can stand to lose so the stakes go up. Fred taunts them with jokes about their luck, he loves it. Digging his right hand into his change pocket he'll rattle the coins and challenge the boys to another round, "ok Phillips, c'mon, don't be such a cheap skate, I'll give you a chance to get your money back, two bits, that's all." They can't resist, everybody shoves a hand into a pocket and comes out with clenched fist slapping on the table and screened glances deke one another's eyes. Each hand can hold from zero to three coins and each player guesses at the total. Around the table they go, getting their digs in at one another's bluffing tactics until the last man calls out his number and snaps open

his hand to reveal zero one two or three coins, they total the coins around the table and the closest hunch wins.

Fred loves this friendly back-booth horsing around. It's good for business and these customers like it. He also wins more than he loses. Every night he empties his pocket of coins into a large plastic piggy bank so that by christmas he can buy something special for the house or for Connie.

So, there, christmas morning spread out on the living room floor beside the tree and wrapping and ribbon debris all the nickles quarters dimes pennies and fifty-cent pieces arranged into piles to be counted and rolled into those special bank coin sheets brought home from the cafe, money money money spangled with his proud gambling smile and wink to us kids that he could do that, bluff each day past those white guys and always have jingle jangle high jinks deep into his right pocket for his family and his own head to hold up to the face of whatever fortune chance luck can be held there in the close darkness of the right-hand palm lined with looking for, then wow, that one christmas I'm given the pot three hundred and twenty-six dollars and ninety-two cents he says that'll help you with your school we'll call it your "timber" scholarship eh Freddy easy games get serious.

Roy and Stanica —

"timber"

from Seasons Greetings from the Diamond Grill
December, 1990

Gum, Hey Fa Choy
and lush and a
soft, soft winter
Fred and Pauline