

A NATURAL EXTENSION OF TODAY'S ECONOMY

By Wil C. Fry
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The paper thin visi-screen hung stiffly from the ceiling. The calendar square on the side of the screen read "December 25, 2072."

"It's a very nice unit," John Doe said, smiling.

A nickel-sized black sphere in the palm of his hand exuded a larger ball of touch-sensitive translucent light. John touched one of the virtual buttons on the ball of light, and the visi-screen lit up with one of 1,245 available entertainment channels.

"... and that's the fate of the newest Mars lander," said a sultry female voice, loudly spilling from invisible speakers. The mechanical unit pictured on the screen was smoking, the gray tufts of burned carbon wafting away on the thin Martian wind. "This image is courtesy of a camera that is the only working piece on the previous Mars lander," the female voice said.

John quickly touched another virtual button, and the sound was muted.

"How much did this set us back?" he asked, glancing past the 12-foot Christmas tree to his wife, Jane Doe.

She smiled. "I bought it at WaFaMe," she said. "During the Christmas sale, it was only 32 cents."

John eyed the WaFaMe logo on the control sphere in his hand. In much smaller print under "WaFaMe" were printed the words: "Walton Family Metropolis."

"It's amazing," he said, "how technology items continue to drop in price, while everything else, keeps going up."

His son, Jake, laughed. "I just bought a gallon of milk yesterday," Jake said. "It cost 435 dollars. Just last year, milk was only 399 dollars a gallon."

John smiled tiredly. He was thinking of the 9 million dollars he still owed for Jake's college education. He only wished there were still legitimate jobs for college graduates. But Jake had dropped out after only 12 years in college, so his paltry doctorate's degree wouldn't get him far. He needed four more years to get his SuperDoctorate, which would entitle him to the good income.

The plastic door of the house clicked, and the three looked up. It was Jill, Jake's little sister.

"Look who made it for Christmas!" John said heartily, standing up. As he dropped the small control sphere for the visi-screen unit, the little black ball hovered in the air, moving slowly toward its parking place near the screen.

John went to the door to greet Jill. Her children were still outside, grabbing luggage from the Mini-Sport-Utility-Van, or MISUV. Each of the seven kids -- the oldest of them only 11 -- carried two large bags. The littlest child dragged his bags across the dirt yard.

"How's my little girl?" John asked warmly, embracing his daughter.

"Just fine, Daddy," Jill answered, grinning from ear to ear. "I got my job back at WaFaMe, so I could afford presents for everyone."

Jane and Jake came to the door to exchange greetings with Jill and her children, and helped with the bags.

John stepped back and looked around the house, wondering where they would all stay. The two-bedroom house was already full. He and Jane were carefully sharing the master bedroom, which was a spacious 9'x9', and Jake had the other bedroom, which was 7 feet long and 4 feet wide. The living room was barely large enough for a couch and the 12' Christmas tree, which was cramped up against the 7-foot ceiling, the topmost branches squashed across the ceiling.

"But look on the bright side," he thought to himself. "This house only cost 25 million dollars."

Part of him wished that Jill had stayed with one of the four husbands that had good jobs. Even two of the non-good-job husbands had been doing okay. The first five husbands, though, he could do without. But another part of him was just glad she was okay.

An hour later, Jane was taking the first round of microwave meals out of the Xpress multi-level microwave. The meals were small, and didn't really quench John's cravings, but they were cheap, at only \$500 apiece.

Just as he sat down at the plastic dining room table, the window fell out of its frame again, clattering to the ground outside.

"Damn it," he said, with half a grimace. "That's the fourth time this week."

"What did people do in the old days, when it was cold?" asked Hashkalishiqua, Jill's oldest daughter.

"Their windows didn't fall out back then," John sighed, climbing out through the hole. "Toss me the duct tape," he called in to Jake.

He caught the flying roll with decided clumsiness. Unlike the schools in Hashkalishiqua's history books, John's school hadn't had any sports teams, so he'd never developed any real dexterity. Still, he knew how to fix a fallen-out window.

With help from hands inside, he steadied the window in the frame, and applied duct tape around the edges. Fortunately, the window was made of plastic, so it hadn't cracked. When he was finished, he wiped the dust from the grassless yard off his boots and came back inside.

Finally, they had all settled down for an afternoon chat. John and Jane sat next to each other on the couch, covered with approximately four crawling and writhing children. Jake sat by himself in the plastic chair near the Christmas tree, holding one of his nieces on his lap. Jill scurried about the room, alternately talking to her parents and screaming at her kids.

"I guess this is as good a time as any to announce our New Year's Resolutions," John said heartily, wishing he knew at least one of the kids' names.

"Why not? That's a great idea!" Jane bounced, glad for a new subject. The last hour of hearing Jill scream at her kids had been hard on her.

"I'll go first," Jake said, getting a dreamy glint in his eye. "In 2073, I resolve to move out of this house, and get a place of my own."

Gasps went up around the room.

Jake continued. "I know, it'll require raising 80,000 dollars every month, but with minimum wage up to 600 dollars per hour, I should be able to. My doctorate degree is good enough to get me a job cleaning dumpsters, and I won't mind the smell so much. Hell, you can barely smell anything anymore, what with all the grease in the sky."

Everyone laughed at that. It was a long-running joke on the evening news that the oil companies would someday quit polluting the world and release electric cars to the public. Of course, it wouldn't happen, not with President Bob "Exxon" Jones in the White House.

"Also," Jake said, "I vow to give at least a dollar a year to charity."

"Good!" Jane clapped. "I for one, know how hard it is to get along in this world. Ever since I lost my job in the animal-saving factory, John and I have been struggling to get along. But, for 2073, I resolve to get another job, even if it's at the Walton Family Metropolis."

"Where else would you get one?" Jake asked, confused.

John laughed. "Son, your mother and I still remember when there were other businesses on earth besides WaFaMe."

"Wow!" breathed Hashkalishiqua. "That was a long time ago! Back before the Waltons bought the United States?"

"That's right," John said laughing. "Way back then. In the old days, kids, the Army could hold maneuvers without asking permission from the Waltons. And the Waltons were not allowed to fashion treaties or declare war on other nations."

"It's not like they declare war much," Jake pointed out. "If they did, they'd end up attacking one of the countries where their products are made."

Jane and John laughed with him.

Then, suddenly, they grew quiet, remembering the recording devices built into the house that were constantly hooked into the WaFaMe network for security reasons.

It would only be a matter of minutes before the Political Correctness And Family Values Police arrived.