

Frazen Oral History, 2020/03/17

Interviewee Name: Ian W. Frazen

Interviewer Name: N/A

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Location of Interviewee: New York City, New York

Location of Interviewer: N/A

Transcriber Name: Ashley Hampton

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Yesterday, my wife took a sip of seltzer from a mason jar. Got up from the couch to put on an exercise video and said that life had become an endless loop of having no plans. I said that even before the pandemic started, she'd always complained about my never taking her out anymore and asked if by now maybe she wasn't used to having no plans. She shot me an annoyed glance. How about we do a movie night I asked, trying a little too eagerly to repair the damage as the days ticked by our apartment and began to feel like a holding cell, as we spent our days trying to find some agency in a world where the only sane rational response was to be constantly afraid. And so inside, we spent our time reading about the virus, consuming information, but especially raw data numbers, because in times of uncertainty, the mind loved nothing more than numbers, facts and figures, because it felt like by mastering these numbers, we could regain control of what was happening. And so we familiarized ourselves with a number of infections in Italy, and the number of hospital beds in New York City and the percentage of new infections resulting in death and the percentage requiring ventilation the percent the stock market fell today and yesterday. This news these numbers they had a way of making all other news seem trivial and irrelevant by comparison. Everyone was told to stay inside their apartments; off from work nowhere to go. Refreshing the New York Times Coronavirus, infection map, trying not to look at their stock portfolios and washing their hands like maniacs, civic institutions, mass transportation, public schools, malls, work and bars and even the goddamn McDonald's had been powered off indefinitely. Now, New Yorkers are a frantic and anxious bunch anyway, but stopped them from going out to Starbucks and getting their morning coffee and keeping them locked in their apartments with only their annoying roommates and or annoying wives really kicked everyone into high gear. There was a non-climate of fear at the virus at the imposed restrictions at the feeling that society would have to grind to an almost complete halt if things were to be stopped from getting much, much worse. When this first started showing up, we went out anyway and throw up our hands and said, "Well, we've got to live our lives." We joke to a friend getting married, "I bet a honeymoon to Wuhan would be pretty affordable right now." In our defense, this was early before people started, you know, dying. But now people didn't joke so much because they were afraid, afraid to see their parents, grandparents and older relatives, fearing that they'd infect them and then have to live with that for the rest of their lives with a guilt that they hadn't cared enough hadn't taken it seriously enough to have separated themselves when they could, because you could transmit the virus without symptoms, spreading it without feeling sick or even knowing that you had it. At night, I slept poorly predicting that in a few weeks, the hospitals will be

overwhelmed. Days were better. As a writer, I was already practicing the art of keeping myself socially isolated anyway. At first, they told us to bump elbows instead of shaking hands, but soon that wasn't safe enough and we had to maintain six feet at all times. And then six feet was too close. So we all had to stay inside of our apartments, sheltering in place to prevent further spread. And so we stayed inside. Virtual happy hours and dinner parties were organized where no one could talk about anything other than virus, friends trading Coronavirus, stats and COVID rumors and what they heard from their brother-in-law, a friend-of-a-friend who works for the DOD [Department of Defense] and which politicians were doing the best and the worst. We discussed the epidemic in the specialized vocabulary that had entered common parlance, terms like super spreader, social distancing, and viral load became commonplace. This was a new era of fear, uncertainty, and doubt. No one knew what would lay on the other side.