

# Channel Zero

by Todd Keisling

12:16

A killer enters the room. No one notices, and the show goes on.

I switch on the receiver and catch a glimpse of tenant #62 in grid four. He's cooking a late dinner. On the street, in the hallway, I might call him Jim, or even Mr. Hollerbach. But here, in crystal-clear hi-definition, he's tenant #62.

That's the way Channel Zero works.

He's accompanied by a scrolling grid of other tenants going about their menial lives. Some are watching their TVs, some are sleeping and some are making love. Sound is muted on this particular grid but, if I wanted to, I could tune in to all of them.

On screen, Mr. Hollerbach reaches for a shaker of salt. He sprinkles it over a steaming frying pan.

With this kind of quality, it's not hard to see he's frying two small chicken breasts.

Other grids begin to slowly scroll across the screen. It never stops. They once called this reality television. That was about a hundred years ago, when there were actual networks that competed for ratings and viewers and money.

This was before the Government took control. Before paranoia grew so rampant that we stopped watching make-believe "sitcoms" and started watching each other.

The Network phased out all programming and, with the Free Constituent Surveillance Act, the Government mandated that all structures be outfitted with SmartCams. We soon found ourselves watching ourselves, outlined as numbers in a single, scrolling grid. They called it Channel Zero.

Mr. Hollerbach removes the pan from the stove. He licks his lips and removes the oven mitts from his hands.

After the FCSA and SmartCam installations, after the concept of Art died a forgotten death, we accepted the new 7 PM curfew. We accepted the mandatory two hour viewing. It didn't take long for

most of us to grow numb to what we were seeing. With everyone watching, with the knowledge that someone would always be watching, we lost our fear. We forgot what it felt like to be afraid.

Tenant #62, Mr. "Jim" Hollerbach, he walks over to his refrigerator and pulls out a bowl of salad. He takes it to the table. There he sits and begins to eat.

When the patrols started after curfew, I knew things had gone too far. Reports trickled in from time to time; reports about friends caught out after dark and shot during the mandatory "Zero Hour." No one seemed to care. Even when friends began to disappear, we sat and did our duty to watch others. The Government used to use fear to control us, but now it found a way to save money by outsourcing the work.

No more.

I jacked into the SmartCam in my apartment and spliced it with an analog AV feed I set up in my closet. I stopped taking my Serotonin supplements.

I started working out.

On screen, grid four, tenant #62 begins to eat a very late dinner. The smell of chicken makes my mouth water, and the sizzling oil and ventilation fan above the stove masks most sounds.

Fear is necessary. It helps a species survive. Without fear, without thought, we are empty squares on a single television channel.

The blade in my pocket is sharp and heavy. I check my watch. It's 12:19.

And the show goes on. I hope someone notices this time.

