

ABSOLUTE ZERO

Alan Woodruff

EXT. TABLE TOP -- EVENING

An old man's hands flick through an ancient scrapbook.

Page after page of yellowed newspaper clippings pass by in a blur.

The occasional headline registers: FREAK RAIL DEATH, WORKERS'S DEATH "UNEXPLAINABLE", etc.

The action stops on a page featuring a large image under the headline: FATALITY AT AURORA. The picture is of a steam locomotive at a rail station.

Cut to: NEWSREEL

A newsreel from the 1950s: black and white images of the train drawn alongside Aurora station, accompanied by a frenzied narration:

NEWSREEL NARRATION

'Tragedy in the outback where a man freezes to death after becoming trapped inside a refrigerated meat wagon... Accidentally locked inside the wagon at the start of the long haul to the city, he was discovered too late to be saved.

A policeman guards the wagon. Inside, a pair of feet - curiously unclothed - protrude from underneath a blanket.

NEWSREEL NARRATION

'He leaves behind a bizarre record, an account of his agonising death, written in his own hand on the walls of the wagon which became his tomb.

Newspaper images show the interior of the wagon: the walls are covered with writing; a railway worker's uniform - shirt, trousers, shoes - are scattered about the floor.

NEWSREEL NARRATION

'He writes that he hopes his final words will be of use to scientists studying the effects of exposure on mankind.

(the music swells
melodramatically)
'A tragic, needless death. A noble,
courageous legacy.

Newspaper and forensic photographs show the aftermath: police and railway officials at the train, the curious onlookers as the body is loaded into a hearse, etc.

Another sequence of images show the deterioration of the writing from an exquisite longhand to an illegible, child-like scrawl.

The final image is of some early writing which begins with the numbers: 7:04.

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

A sheaf of close-typed pages rest on a man's thigh. He's reading aloud.

DOCTOR

'Seven-o-four: Goose bumps;
heartbeat: 117. My eyes and ears
sting with the cold. Breathing
fast, can't count it. Walk around
the wagon to keep warm. I'm
sweating yet I'm cold.

The doctor is in his seventies, thin and frail. His body language suggests his extreme shyness, with his torso twisted uncomfortably away from the camera.

(The image is black and white and grainy, suggesting a television kine from the 1950s.)

An off-screen interviewer asks the questions. His voice is polished and old-fashioned, typical of the time when Australian radio and television journalists had to effect English accents.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

So, Doctor, what does that tell you?

Despite his shyness, the doctor is determined to communicate. However, the effort required to overcome his diffidence makes him sound curt and cranky.

DOCTOR

'Four minute to seven...' The train hadn't even been underway ten minutes at that stage.

The interviewer remains silent, and the doctor reluctantly fills the void.

DOCTOR

Well, it means he already knew, doesn't it? That he'd already made up his mind.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

That he was going to die?

DOCTOR

Why else would he have started writing?

INTERVIEWER V.O.

You seem surprised at that?

DOCTOR

I am surprised. Yes, indeed.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

You're saying he jumped the gun?

DOCTOR

I'm saying there wasn't any gun.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

I'm afraid, Doctor, you've lost me.

DOCTOR

Tell me something. If you were in his shoes, what would you have done?

INTERVIEWER V.O.

Frankly, I'm not sure - but I must say I don't think I could match his level-headedness.

DOCTOR

His level-headedness? How do you work that out?

INTERVIEWER V.O.

His resolve to leave a record of his death for science. I couldn't match that.

The doctor opens his mouth to challenge him but remains silent.

EXT. DESERT -- DAY

A steam train rides the dead-straight track through the desert. The locomotive is small and utilitarian - slow but sure - and pulls a dozen or so freight wagons.

One of the wagons bears the sign: Schultz Bros. Ltd, Wholesale Butchers & Meat Exporters

Smoke billows from the stack, producing a trail of white, cotton-wool clouds which dissipate languidly in the azure sky.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAY

A small kerosene lantern feebly illuminates the wagon. A man, Ford, appears out of the gloom walking briskly around the perimeter of the wagon.

He's in his early thirties and wears the uniform of a station attendant. His features glisten with sweat.

DOCTOR V.O.

'Seven twenty-three: Pulse 113.
Skin cold. Walking to keep warm but getting tired. Fingers and toes cold. Cold all over.

Ford disappears briefly into the darkness before reappearing. The effort required to maintain the pace of his walking is beginning to exhaust him.

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

The doctor looks up from the notes on his lap.

DOCTOR

He was dressed for summer, not for the cold, just a cotton shirt and pants. And he was the wrong body type too - he was a pretty lean sort of bloke, all skin and bone...

INTERVIEWER V.O.

Not much avoirdupois.

The attempt at humour is lost on the doctor.

DOCTOR

I'm sorry?

INTERVIEWER V.O.

I mean, he wasn't carrying much weight.

DOCTOR

No.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

So he's already in strife?

DOCTOR

Yes - and we both know how much strife.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

And the walking?

DOCTOR

It's the thing to do, really, to keep the metabolic rate up and generate heat but...

INTERVIEWER V.O.

But how long can he keep it up?

DOCTOR

Yes, that's the question.

EXT. DESERT STATION -- DAY

The train is pulling into a small station which stands completely alone amid the stunted vegetation of the desert plain.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAY

Ford stands by the door with broom. As soon as the train stops he begins striking the door with the broom handle.

He yells for assistance at the top of his lungs.

EXT. DESERT STATION -- DAY

The station attendant walks past the wagon on his way to the guards' wagon at the rear of the train.

Nothing is heard from within.

The day is hot and the attendant's shirt is wet with perspiration. He accepts a mail bag from the guard, and the guard signals the driver to depart.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAY

At the sound of the whistle, Ford slumps against the door, catching his breath.

Later:

The train is fully underway.

Ford lurches around the wagon, rolling a cigarette as he goes. He drops his matches and picks them up clumsily, almost drunkenly.

He lights up the smoke - and coughs and splutters as the acrid fumes burn his lungs. He drops the cigarette and falls hard against the wall, half-sliding, half-falling to the floor.

Later:

Ford squatting on the floor, his back wedged into a corner, casually passes his splayed-out fingers through the flames of a lighted-cigarette paper. His face registers no pain.

DOCTOR V.O.

As soon as he stops, you see, he starts paying double for all that exercise. First, he expended all that energy walking around, and now he's losing all that heat because his body's just dumping it out into the air. The blood vessels under his skin have opened up and the heat's just pouring out of him. And his wet clothes aren't helping.

Later:

A small ball of cigarette papers burn in a pile on the floor. Ford empties the contents of his wallet onto the flames, setting aside a small photograph of himself and a young woman.

In the photograph, he has an arm around the woman's waist, holding her close. The couple beam happily into the camera.

Ford picks up a pile of tobacco from his cigarette tin and gingerly drops it onto the fire. He pushes his outstretched hands toward the heat but screws his head away to avoid the acrid fumes.

When the smoke becomes too much, he slaps out the flames and succumbs to another coughing fit.

A small cloud of burning tobacco wafts through the air and lands unnoticed on the photograph. The image blisters and buckles in the heat.

Too late, Ford notices. He swats the flame and scoops up the image, grimacing at the damage.

DOCTOR V.O.

'Seven fifty-three. I want to cut off my fingers and toes to stop the pain. Ears aching. My body is freezing up, getting stiffer and stiffer. Getting tired.

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

The doctor waits apprehensively for the next question.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

So he's showing the symptoms of exposure?

DOCTOR

By the book. Classic incipient hypothermia.

There's a pregnant pause before he blusters on.

DOCTOR

He's finding it cold because his brain has started diverting blood away from the skin to minimise heat

loss. It's the classic reaction to a cold stimulus. And the empty blood vessels then act like insulation, a bit like the asbestos lagging around a hot water pipe to keep the heat in... The brain is looking after its own best interests, you see. It's protecting itself and the other essential organs - the lungs, the heart, the spinal cord. They're more important than fingers and toes, it'll do whatever it can to save them.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

So he's already started to freeze?

DOCTOR

Yes, of course... And, no, of course.

No amount of intimidation from the interviewer can make him elaborate.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAY

Ford leans heavily against a wall, writing clumsily. His hands have twisted grotesquely back toward his wrists making the operation difficult.

DOCTOR V.O.

His muscles and tendons have cooled and tightened making everything difficult. Soon they'll become like claws. Useless.

He reads the word Ford is writing.

DOCTOR V.O.

'Neck and back like rock, like ice...

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

The doctor continues.

DOCTOR

'Everything stiff and cold...

(he looks up from
the notes)

It's called pre-shivering muscle
tone. He's losing more heat than
he's making, so his body's about to
try to warm itself up a bit... Your
body generates about as much heat a
light bulb...

He points to one of the off-screen movie lights.

DOCTOR

Not one of these blokes, just an
ordinary bulb. It mightn't sound
like much but in his situation...

INTERVIEWER V.O.

He needs all he can get.

DOCTOR

Right, so muscles - opposing groups
of muscles - start contracting and
relaxing against one and other. A
bit like rubbing your hands together
if you like. There's no overall
movement because they cancel each
other out, just little tremors.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

Shivering.

DOCTOR

That's right. Shivering.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

So he's slipping deeper and deeper
into hypothermia?

DOCTOR

Like I said before. Yes - and no.

EXT. DESERT -- DAY

The railway tracks lead the eye to a shimmering heat haze
in the distance.

The train appears through the haze as though parting some lustrous curtain of heat, its outline uncertain and mercurial.

INT. TRAIN CABIN -- DAY

Coal is being shovelled into the roaring firebox by anonymous hands.

Another set of hands - also unidentified - rest on the controls. Around the cabin, steam and water leak in small jets from various valves and gauges.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAY

The kerosene lantern produces its own heat haze, in miniature.

In a far corner of the wagon, Ford half stands, half crouches, his back to us. One hand steadies himself against the wall while the others tug at the buttons of his trousers.

Finally, looking embarrassed and ashamed, he begins urinating against the wall.

DOCTOR V.O.

I suppose you want all the grizzly details?

INTERVIEWER V.O.

Of course.

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

The doctor continues awkwardly.

DOCTOR

His kidneys are working flat-out trying to deal with the fluid overload which occurred when the blood vessels constricted, trying to keep the heat in. You've got the same amount of fluid squeezed into a smaller space - and so the kidneys are working overtime trying to get rid of some of it.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

What else is happening?

DOCTOR

His metabolism - well, everything, really - metabolism, breathing, blood pressure - the lot - would all be just slowing down. Classic hypothermia.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

Well, yes and no.

DOCTOR

That's right. Yes and no - and no and yes.

EXT. DESERT -- DAY

The train steams majestically across the orange desert.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAY

The walls of the wagon bear witness to Ford's decline. Whereas his early writing was elegant and accomplished, it has deteriorated to a barely legible scrawl.

Slumped against a wall, he makes another entry, this time on the floor beside him.

He focuses intensely as he completes the word 'Sleepy'.

But curiously - impossibly - the writing is once again the elegant longhand of before.

He gazes at the word drunkenly.

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

DOCTOR

Everything affects everything else, you see. The cold affects the enzyme reactions in his brain, slows them right down. But his breathing's down, too. Blood pressure, blood flow, everything. All these would affect the cerebral metabolic rate. He probably wouldn't even recognise his own wife right now.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

So, amnesia?

DOCTOR

Amnesia, hallucination, everything.
The whole box and dice.

INT. DESERT -- DAY

The train steams through an underpass. Smoke billows up from the engine and begins filling the screen.

By the time the train has past, the screen is completely filled with white smoke.

The image of the burnt photograph of Ford and his wife appears through the smoke.

It begins to 'un-burn' itself.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAY

Ford shows no emotion as the photograph restores itself; the charred image re-blisters and reforms to reveal the original image of Ford and his wife.

EXT. PICNIC -- DAY

Ford's wife, framed to match her image in the photograph, waits excitedly as Ford fiddles with a self-timer camera.

He sets the timer going and runs to her - but before he can get there, the camera fires, rendering him as a blur.

He makes another attempt and again is caught halfway. In this second image he's even more blurred than the first.

Another failed attempt - and this time he's so blurred as to be almost unrecognisable.

He reaches her on the fourth try. He slips an arm around her waist and they wait self-consciously for the shutter to fire.

He sneaks a kiss.

The tender mood is broken when her face creases into a look of anxiety. She looks past him as though seeking the source of a distant distraction.

He follows her gaze but sees nothing - until out of nowhere a steam locomotive appears and thunders past, its shrill whistle shattering the silence of his fantasy.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAY

The picnic photograph - burnt and blistered - lies on the floor beside Ford.

He's shaking violently, uncontrollably.

EXT. DESERT -- DAY

The train steams powerfully past the camera. As it passes, the camera jerks crazily up to the sky.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

But how did they know it was sixty-eight degrees in there?

DOCTOR V.O.

I don't know. They worked it out somehow.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

That was the minimum, they say?

DOCTOR V.O.

That's right. Sixty-eight degrees minimum.

NEWSREEL

Black and white newsreel footage of the Railway Workshops.

NEWSREEL NARRATION

'At the Victorian Railway Workshops, the compressor unit is checked by police and railway engineers.

The compressor components have been disassembled and are laid out on a table. An engineer holds one of the components in his fingers, then separates it into two halves, revealing it to be broken.

NEWSREEL NARRATION

It wasn't working! Now the boffins are really confused. A man died in this wagon. The writing on the

walls tell of a painful death by
freezing - yet it can't be so! How
did he die? Was it a cruel trick of
the human mind? The scientists want
to know. The police need to know!

The music swells to a melodramatic flourish.

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- DAY

The doctor stares morosely at the notes in his lap.

DOCTOR

So, you still admire his level-
headedness?

INTERVIEWER V.O.

But how? It beggars belief.

DOCTOR

He believed it.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

But it's not possible.

The doctor reads from his notes.

DOCTOR

'Fingers covered with frostbite
burns. Blisters...

INTERVIEWER V.O.

Certainly, he had a vivid
imagination.

The doctor waves the papers in the air.

DOCTOR

This is the autopsy report.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

But it was sixty-eight degrees.

DOCTOR

That's right.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

But surely he must've known how cold
it really was.

DOCTOR

He knew all right - he was freezing
to death.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

But only in his head.

DOCTOR

(sarcastically)
Why didn't he just wake up to
himself, you mean?

EXT. DESERT -- SUNSET

Time lapse photography shows the vestiges of a picture-
postcard sunset.

Stars appear in the darkening sky. The moon rises, then
quickly arcs from view.

In the distance, the lights of a small railway station:
Aurora.

EXT. DESERT -- NIGHT

The train speeds through the night.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- NIGHT

The shivering is at its height. Ford shakes
uncontrollably, his face twisted with pain.

Later:

Miraculously, inexplicably, the shivering has stopped.

He squints around the wagon, suspicious at his release.

He raises a hand in front of him. It shakes so
uncontrollably that it is rendered as a blur. Ford's face
registers his terror.

He raises his other hand. The same. He drags himself to
his feet and staggers around the wagon.

His entire body has become a blurry, amorphous mass - it's
as though he's been so consumed by shivering he has no
form.

EXT. DESERT -- NIGHT

The train and surrounding countryside are rendered in the same amorphous fashion.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- NIGHT

Ford's eyes fall on the box of matches on the floor. The box sinks into the floorboards as they're made of liquid.

Ford watches stupidly.

INT. BLACK VOID

The box of matches tumbles through the air in extreme slow motion.

A match is dragged along the striking edge of the box and explodes into life.

EXT. RAILWAY YARD -- DAWN

The locomotive sits alone at one end of the railway station. The carriages are elsewhere.

Ford holds the lighted match underneath a wad of newspaper. He feeds the burning paper into the firebox of the loco.

Later:

The firebox glows red with burning coals.

Ford makes his way through the rail yard to the line of wagons, carrying with him a broom and a kerosene lantern.

He enters each in turn, whistling and sweeping as he goes, finally arriving at the refrigerated wagon. He levers himself inside.

Back at the locomotive, the driver and fireman climb aboard, and ease the engine toward the wagons. Ford continues his sweeping, unaware of the imminent danger.

The engine slowly approaches the wagons, colliding intentionally with the front wagon to secure the coupling.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAWN

Ford is almost knocked off his feet by the impact. He spins around in time to see the airtight door slam closed.

EXT. RAILWAY YARD -- DAWN

As the wagon door slides closed, it reveals an official-looking notice attached to the outside of the wagon.

It's a repair order declaring the compressor unit of the wagon to be malfunctioning.

Three cryptic letters, scrawled in large print, dominate the form: NBG

INTERVIEWER V.O.

And 'NBG'?

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

The doctor squirms.

DOCTOR

It's a slang term, I understand. It means the compressor isn't working.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

A slang term?

The doctor's embarrassment is acute.

DOCTOR

Yes. It stands for 'no bloody good'.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- DAWN

Black.

Ford lights a match and tries the door. It is locked tight.

DOCTOR V.O.

You know afterwards, after they'd taken him away, we all just stood around in that wagon. No-one said anything, what could you say? But we were all thinking the same thing...

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

The doctor continues.

DOCTOR

Jesus Christ Almighty, it was a
stinking hot day but inside that
wagon it was... It was pleasant.

EXT. DESERT -- NIGHT

The train speeds through the night.

In the cabin, the anonymous hands tend the engine, stoking
the firebox, adjusting the controls, etc.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- NIGHT

Ford lies on the floor, staring blankly at the flickering
light of the lantern.

The vacant look on his face becomes one of mounting terror.
Suddenly he thrashes around on the floor, grabbing at the
buttons of his shirt and ripping it from his body.

He kicks off his shoes, then his trousers.

After the frenzy, he is naked.

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

The doctor sits morosely.

DOCTOR

They don't know why that happens.
But it happens a fair bit
apparently. They just pull their
clothes off... They reckon it might
be because the blood vessels under
the skin suddenly open up again -
though why? - and there's a rush of
blood to the surface, so their skin
suddenly feels really hot, like
their clothes are on fire.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- NIGHT

Ford lies naked on the floor. He's resumed his fixation with the lantern flame, now tiny and flickering as the kerosene runs low.

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

INTERVIEWER V.O.

Tell me something, Doctor. What if you were in his position?

DOCTOR

Would I know, do you mean?

INTERVIEWER V.O.

Yes.

DOCTOR

Well, you'd like to think so, wouldn't you?

But his shrug reveals his uncertainty.

INTERVIEWER V.O.

Would you write on the walls?

DOCTOR

(adamant)

No! Never. Not in a month of bloody Sundays.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- NIGHT

Ford's eyes, barely open, stare at the guttering flame. Only the occasional flutter of his eyelids signal that he's still alive.

The flame flickers and extinguishes.

Black.

Silence.

Suddenly, a horrendous piercing screech as the brakes lock on.

EXT. TRAIN -- NIGHT

Metal grates on metal as the train skids along the tracks, showering the rails and sleepers with sparks.

The train grinds to a noisy halt.

The driver and fireman leap from the cabin and sprint along the wagons.

INT. MEAT WAGON -- NIGHT

The door to the wagon is thrown open.

DRIVER

Jesus bloody Christ! It's young
Fordy!

He leans into the wagon and grabs him, hauling him to the door.

DRIVER

Come on, let's get him outside.
Quick!

EXT. DESERT -- NIGHT

They lay him on the ground and begin rubbing his face and arms vigorously.

FIREMAN

He's dead.

DRIVER

No, he not, bloody close to it
though.

Ford looks at them groggily.

FIREMAN

He's like ice, the poor bastard.
Come on, Fordy. Come on, mate.

DRIVER

You're going to be all right, young
fella. Let's get him up to the
engine, by the heat.

Ford forces himself to his feet. He struggles to be free of his rescuers.

DRIVER

Easy, mate. We're just going to
warm you up a bit.

But he pushes them away and begins shuffling toward the front of the train on his own. The men call to him urgently but he ignores them.

At the engine he presses his palms first to the warm metal and then to his cheeks.

The heat rejuvenates him and a slow, wide smile grows across his face.

Suddenly, he pushes himself away from the train and runs into the night in a slow, steady trot.

The trot becomes a jog - slow at first but building, his energy returning with every step.

The train falls away and the hiss of escaping steam is lost under his deep, easy breathing.

His smile grows broader ... before collapses like a punctured balloon.

He stops in his tracks, then spins around to see the distant train.

Instead of the image he expects to see, he's presented with a black and white newspaper photograph of the wagon.

Several policemen stand inside the wagon staring down at the floor. A railway worker, drawing hard on a cigarette, stands outside.

Another figure walks toward the wagon with his back to the photographer; he's much closer to the camera flash and so his image is overexposed and out of focus.

Ford gapes at the image. His eye travels from the people in the wagon to the blurry figure hurrying to join them.

The focus of the photograph magically shifts so that the wagon becomes soft while the figure moves into crisp relief. A second - matching - photograph, taken immediately after the first reveals the figure's face.

It is the doctor. He and Ford 'stare' at each other momentarily.

The image of Ford freezes, then jump cuts to another image of him, identical to the first except that it is now

blurred and streaked in a manner similar to his failed efforts with the self-timer at the picnic.

This image, in turn, is replaced by another, more streaked and blurred.

And another image. And another - until Ford is rendered as nothing more than a few streaks of white against a black background.

Finally, even the streaks fade from view.

Black.

Another newspaper image: a stretcher is being passed into the wagon.

And another: the stretcher, now loaded with Ford's body and draped with a sheet, being carried along the platform by a couple of policemen. On the wall behind them is a large sign bearing the name of the station: Aurora

EXT. AURORA STATION, PRESENT DAY -- DAY

All that remains of the Aurora sign today is a weather-worn wooden frame.

The station has been long abandoned in the name of progress; the windows broken and boarded up, the walls daubed with obscenities and puerile graffiti.

A long-haul diesel, pulling a seemingly endless string of grain wagons, appears at one end of the platform and makes its way indifferently past the broken-down station.

INT. DOCTOR'S RESIDENCE -- NIGHT

The following sequence is introduced by a series of short, split-second shots which suggest the usual routine of a camera crew prior to wrapping at the end of shoot: the flashes which accompany gate checks, camera run-on with splayed fingers across the lens, etc.

The footage also reveals the doctor, visibly relaxed, standing beside his chair. He's removed his jacket and tie and sips from a cup of tea.

Another shot shows the doctor seated once again at the table. On the table in front of him is a Nagra, a reel-to-

reel tape recorder, once the film industry standard for recording audio.

He shows no awareness of being filmed as he listens to playback through headphones.

He listens intently at first, presumably to the sound of his own voice, before breaking into a broad, almost child-like, grin.

But as he listens, his buoyant mood disappears. His face becomes grave and his eyes well with tears.

His embarrassment is compounded when he spots the camera rolling. After a baleful look into the lens he screws around in his seat to face away from us.

More camera flashes and run-on.

End.