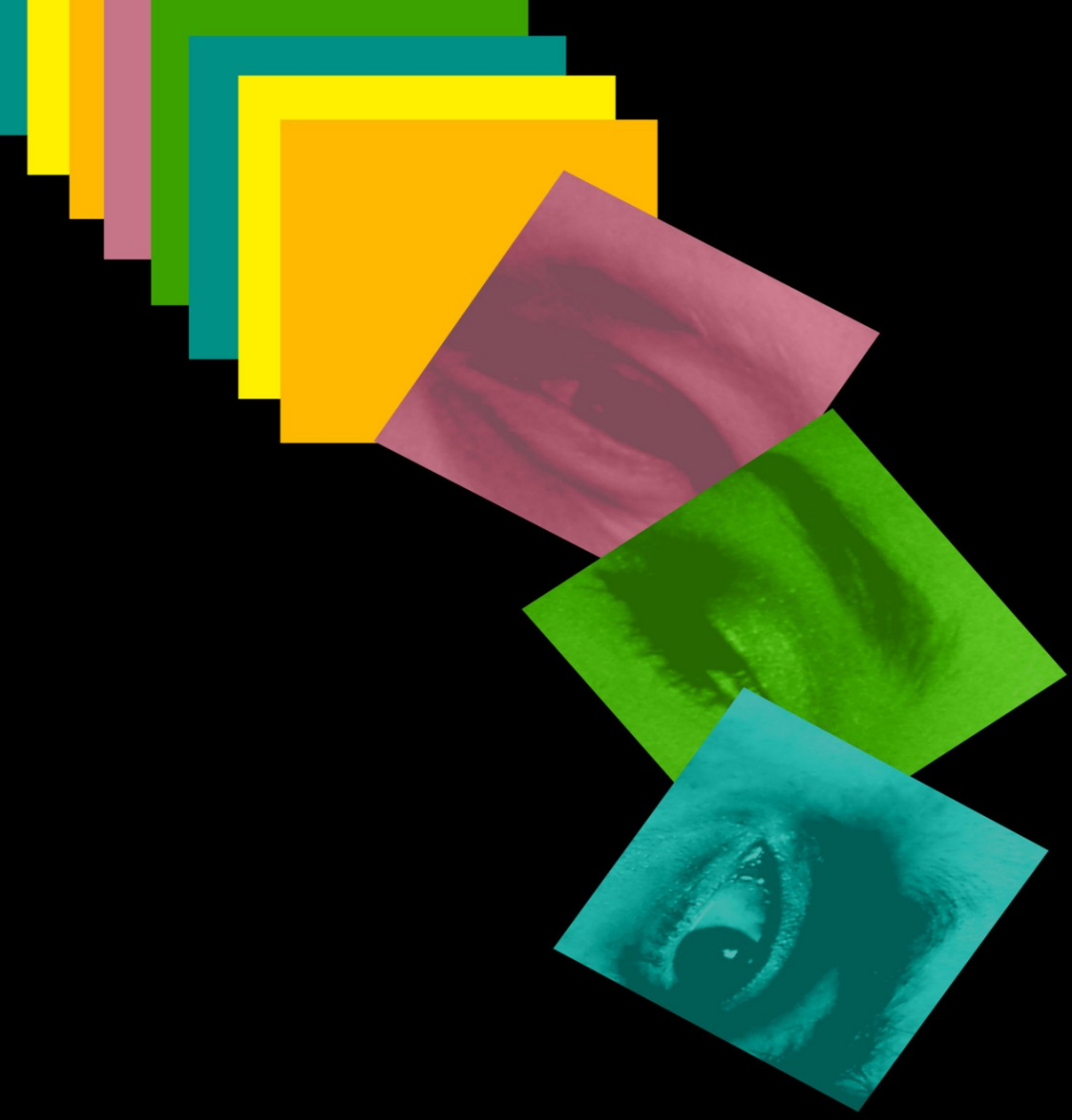


fulfillment

A Novel

lee cole

author of *Groundskeeping*

Also by Lee Cole

Groundskeeping

Fulfillment

Lee Cole

Alfred A. Knopf *New York* 2025

A BORZOI BOOK PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF 2025

Copyright © 2025 by Lee Cole

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

Published by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

Knopf, Borzoi Books, and the colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Name: Cole, Lee, [date] author.
Title: Fulfillment / Lee Cole.
Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2025.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024023030 (print) | LCCN 2024023031 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593802861 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593802878 (ebook)
Subject: LCGFT: Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3603.04288 F85 2024 (print) | LCC PS3603.04288 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240517
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024023030
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024023031

Ebook ISBN 9780593802878

Cover illustration by Tyler Spangler; (image details) Oscar Abolafia/TPLP/Getty Images; Jena Ardell/Getty Images

Cover design by Janet Hansen

penguinrandomhouse.com | aaknopf.com

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, https://eu-contact.penguin.ie.

ep_prh_7.1a_151800104_c0_r0

Contents

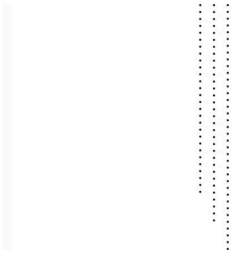
So they take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie. The sun is just comin' down and they can feel the night on their backs. What they don't know is that each one of 'em is afraid, see. Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep ridin' like that straight into the night. Not knowing. And the one who's chasin' doesn't know where the other one is taking him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going.

—Sam Shepard, True West

Part

ONE

One



Everyone was given a path. There were shifters and sweepers, sorters and feeders. There were pickers and porters and air drivers. There were loaders and unloaders, ramp workers and water spiders, grounders and stowers and freighters.

Emmett was declared an unloader. Third shift, where they always "needed bodies." He signed the paperwork, wrote the word "Void" on a check.

The woman who gave his interview said there were levels to every path, opportunities for advancement, for greater benefits. She made it sound like a game you could win.

Nothing's binding, she said. People bounce around, find their niche.

Emmett came to realize, as she spoke, that your path meant nothing, really, except the position where you started. It was only a piece of jargon.

I don't have a permanent address at the moment, he told her. But I will soon.

That's fine, she said. You're not alone.

—

There was nothing but farmland where they built it, and it rose up now from the fields of dead corn like a vast anomaly. A dozen warehouses, two

runways. A parking lot fit for a stadium. It looked, from the window of the shuttle bus at night, like a lonesome galaxy in the borderless dark. The sodium lamps in the lot gave off orange coronas, and the fainter beacons of the taxiways arranged themselves in trembling constellations.

The people on board the shuttle were too visible in the harsh light, the shapes of their skulls apparent in their faces. They tightened the Velcro straps of back braces, ate strong-smelling soups and curries from Tupperware, struggling to reach their mouths with their spoons as the bus shook and jounced. They watched porn on their phones—slack-faced, mouths ajar. They played word games, poker, Candy Crush. They spun the reels of cartoon slot machines. They rubbed at scratch-offs with pennies. They stared with glassy resignation at absolutely nothing.

The guard shack was chaotic, men with wands shouting over the high-pitched keening of the metal detectors, herding the workers. The guards were not TSA, belonging instead to a private security firm, and they looked to Emmett like Neo-Nazis who'd recently finished prison sentences—Viking braids, bleached goatees, tattoos of Iron Crosses on their forearms.

He sat with the other recruits in an office annex, listening to Scott, their "Learning Ambassador," break down the workers' basic duties and the company's expectations. He was a small and energetic man, pacing to and fro, his lanyard ID badge swinging pendulum-like. Broken blood vessels lent his cheeks a rosy appearance, and he had a little boy's haircut, his bangs clipped short in a perfectly straight line.

You might think of this place as a warehouse, he said. But here at Tempo, we like to think of it as a *ware-home*.

They were made to click through a series of training modules on computers from the early aughts. They watched video clips, wherein a softspoken female narrator highlighted recent company achievements over a soundtrack of jazzy Muzak. The clips underscored Tempo's ethical commitment to creating a better world. But if Emmett learned anything from them, it was the extent to which the company's maneuverings had touched all realms of commerce. They were in the business of both

fulfillment and distribution, shipping their own parcels—the orders boxed and sorted at smaller regional hubs—along with the parcels of anyone willing to pay. They'd begun to build retail warehouses, in competition with Walmart and Target. They'd been buying regional supermarket chains, and would use their network of distribution centers and their fleet of trucks to deliver groceries directly to the doorsteps of eager customers. In the video, a Tempo delivery driver in her familiar evergreen uniform handed a paper sack of bananas and grapes and baguettes to an elderly woman, who smiled and waved as the green electric truck pulled away.

Officially, it was called the Tempo Air Cargo Distribution Center, but Scott called it simply "the Center." It was Tempo's largest distribution hub, and had been built here in Nowheresville, Kentucky, because of its geographic centrality. Some of the workers commuted from Bowling Green or Elizabethtown, but most came from the forgotten hamlets of the surrounding counties, places with names like Horse Branch and Sunfish, Spring Lick and Falls of Rough. There had once been coal mines and tobacco stemmeries in that area, auto plants and grist mills. But all those enterprises had fled or been shuttered. Now Tempo had arrived to take their place.

What we're doing here is regional rejuvenation, Scott said. We're creating long-term opportunities.

The recruits were called upon to introduce themselves and offer a "fun fact" about their lives. When Emmett's turn arrived, he said he spent his free time writing screenplays. Really, there'd been only one screenplay—an evolving, never-ending autobiographical work that he'd abandoned and revived a dozen times. But he feared that admitting this would make him sound insane.

How bout that, Scott said. We have a screenwriter in our midst. What are they about?

Just my life, he said. They're autobiographical.

Hey, I better look out, Scott said. Maybe one day you'll write about this. Maybe one day we'll see it on the big screen.

Then he called on the next recruit, whose “fun fact” was that a miniature horse had kicked him in the head as a young boy, leaving him without a sense of smell.

—

Emmett moved to the warehouse—the ware-home, rather—and began what Scott called the “Skill Lab” portion of training. An enormous digital clock hung near the entrance, red numerals burning through the haze of warehouse dust. Beneath it, a scanner and a flatscreen monitor were mounted. You held your badge to the crisscross of lasers, and when the system read the barcode, your image appeared on the screen. They’d taken the photos on the first day of orientation, the trainees backed against a blank wall, unsure whether to smile. They looked like mugshots. When you saw yourself appear onscreen—the past-self who’d taken this job, who’d embarked on this path—and you gazed up at the red digits, measuring time by the second, you knew, unmistakably, that you were on the clock. It was the only clock, as far as Emmett knew, in the warehouse.

On the wall, near the break room door, a large sign read: We’ve worked 86 days without a lost time accident! The number was a digital counter. Emmett wondered what had happened 86 days ago. Each night, the number rose—87, 88, 89—and whatever had caused this loss of time receded further into the Center’s collective memory.

It was a huge, hangar-like structure, an intricate maze of conveyor belts, all churning and chugging at once. The racket was like a subway train perpetually arriving at the platform—the clattering rhythm, the screak of friction. Bays for trucks took up one side; on the other, loading docks for planes. The floor was studded with steel ball bearings and rollers, so the shipping containers—“cans”—could be towed easily from the docks to the belt lanes. It was all so labyrinthine and vast that Emmett felt what he might begrudgingly call awe. He’d never gazed at the vaulted ceiling of a cathedral,

sunlight turned to scattered jewels by stained glass, but he imagined the feeling might be similar.

When it came to the work itself, there was not much to learn. If they remembered nothing else, said Scott, they should remember the Eight Rules of Lifting and Lowering.

Approach the object, feet shoulder width apart, bend at the knees, test the weight of the package, grip opposite corners, lift smoothly, pivot or step without twisting, use existing equipment.

Unloading the containers of air cargo onto conveyor belts was the one and only dimension of his work, the same task repeated, ad infinitum. They showed him how to latch the cans into the lanes, how to break the yellow plastic seals. They showed him the little hydraulic knob that lifted and lowered the conveyor belt. (This was the "existing equipment" mentioned in the last of the Eight Rules.) They showed him the "small-sort" belt for loose envelopes and small parcels, and the "irreg" belt for unboxed freight—tires, axles, machine parts, etc.

And that was it.

It's a simple job, really, said Scott. Put boxes onto a conveyor belt until the can is empty, then bring over a new can. Do the same thing. Rinse and repeat.

Most nights, as he left, he saw the Blood Bus—an RV outfitted by the Red Cross to function as a mobile blood donation center. A fat man stood outside, calling out to the workers as they spilled from the shuttles. Hop on the bus, give your blood to us! he shouted. Hop on the bus, give your blood to us!

The man was always slick with sweat, his face purple and engorged from the exertion of shouting. No one ever seemed to enter the bus, and Emmett wondered why they came here. The last thing he'd want to do, leaving his shift hungry and aching, was donate blood. But there must be a few, he thought, to make the blood man's efforts worthwhile. Those who heard the call and said, *What the hell?* They were already spent. Why not open their veins, give a little more?

—

He met his supervisor, a man named Jason Flake. Everyone called him "Flaky." He was younger and much taller than Emmett, his arms too long and skinny for his frame. He reminded Emmett of a praying mantis. You could tell the supervisors from the union workers by the clothes they wore—Tempo golf shirts tucked into pleated khakis—and by their radios, shoulder mics clipped to their collars. In the beginning, Flaky kept a close eye on Emmett. Turn your badge to face out, bud, he'd say, and Emmett would rotate the laminated ID badge Velcroed to his upper bicep. They were supposed to unload twenty boxes per minute, and the supervisors knew the precise average of each package handler. The boxes placed on the conveyor passed through a bright, mirrored scanner, each barcode logged in the system.

You're at 18.3 per minute, bud, Flaky would say, without looking up from his iPad. Try to pick it up a little.

Each night, as his shift wound down, Flaky came to Emmett's lane, stood in the doorway of the can, and asked him to recite the Eight Rules of Lifting and Lowering. When Emmett had gone through them, Flaky would scribble something on a clipboard and ask Emmett to sign. He came to realize, gradually, that the Eight Rules were an insurance policy; this is why they mattered so much to management. All the other safety protocols—hazmat handling procedures, what to do during a tornado, etc.—would so rarely come to any use that their presence in the modules was almost a formality.

But the Eight Rules—they governed the only sanctioned movement of Emmett's body on the clock. And if you understood the Eight Rules—if, in fact, you signed your name to a piece of paper *attesting* that you understood them—then you could never be injured in such a way that blame fell on the company. If you ruptured a disk in your back, or blew out your knee, or

crushed your fingers, it would be because you'd failed, in some way, to follow the Eight Rules.

—

THERE WAS A VILLAGE within walking distance from the shuttle pickup—an "unincorporated community" called Middle Junction with a motel. This was where he'd been living, paying a weekly rate. He'd lived in New Orleans before, had lost his job there at an Outback Steakhouse, and come home to Kentucky knowing that Tempo would hire anyone. He had not yet told his mother, Kathy, he was back. But his money had nearly run out; the motel life was not sustainable. He called her after six months of near silence, sprawled out on the bed's pilled comforter in the tiny room that stank of cigarette smoke.

I'm home, he said.

Emmett? she said. Are you okay? Where are you?

I'm home, he said again.

In Paducah?

No, I'm in this nowhere town—out past Beaver Dam.

What in the world are you doing there?

Getting a job, he said. At the Tempo hub. I'm almost through with orientation.

What happened to New Orleans?

It's a long story.

Where are you living?

In a motel.

Well, that won't do, she said. That won't do at all.

She made him promise to come home, said she'd buy him a Greyhound ticket. I'd fetch you myself, she said, but your brother and his wife are coming this weekend.

Joel was Emmett's half-brother, but Kathy never made the distinction. He lived in New York, where he taught "cultural studies" at a small college—a subject Emmett had never been able to make heads or tails of. He'd published a book a couple years earlier and had married his wife, Alice, right after. The last time he'd seen them was at their wedding.

I don't know, he said. Spending time with Joel had a way of making him feel sorry for the state of his life.

This is a blessing! Kathy said. Both my boys home—we'll have a family reunion!

The next day, he waited for the bus as twilight fell. The town was little more than a crossroads: a gas station, a farm supply store, a Dollar General with Amish buggies in the lot. Beside the Greyhound stop, in a patch of grass, someone had put up three flagpoles and a gazebo, and there were white wooden crosses in rows, bearing the names of locals who'd died during the pandemic. Emmett waited alone, reading the names, hearing the rasp of wind in the dry corn, the faint melodies of country music drifting from the vacant gas station.

The bus arrived and took him west. He drew a book from his backpack, a manual on screenwriting. It was called *The Eternal Story: Screenwriting Made Simple*. He read for a while by the light of the overhead lamp till he grew tired. Tinny music came from the other passengers' headphones. When he closed his eyes, his dreams for the future played like movies. New York, Los Angeles—he'd never seen them in person, only in images on screens.

He watched the scrolling world and thought about his life, how he'd gotten to this point. *The Center*. One thing he was sure of: they were far from the center. One saw this, clearly, from the window of a Greyhound bus. One saw the brushstrokes of irrelevance in the landscape itself. The rhyme of towns, the patchwork fields. The illusion of movement. Most of America was like this, though Emmett sometimes forgot, spending so much of his life in fantasy. Traveling by Greyhound had a way of inflicting realism on even the most ardent dreamer. One saw, as Emmett saw now, the glowing corporate emblems, the names and symbols hoisted on stilts. One saw prisons that

looked like high schools. High schools that looked like prisons. One saw the blaze of stadium lights above the tree line, heard the faint echo of the anthem, of military brass and drums. One saw the salvage yards of broken machines. The mannequin of Christ pinned to a cross. The moon-eyed cattle, standing in smoky pastures at dusk. One saw huge flags rippling above car dealerships. Combines blinking in fields at night. One could see all this, unreeling frame by frame, and understand, as Emmett understood, the immense bitterness of exile.

Two

His mother greeted him at the Greyhound depot. Kathy was a small, sinewy woman, her hair in a silver bob that grazed her chin. The back of her Town & Country minivan was heaped with clothing.

Don't mind that, she said. That's all going to consignment.

She hugged Emmett and pulled back to get a good look at him.

The prodigal son returns, she said. You look tired.

I've been on the night shift all week.

Your eyes—you look like a raccoon.

It's good to see you, too, Emmett said.

Kathy lived in West Paducah, between the mall and the old uranium enrichment plant. Much of the farmland there had been subdivided. What had once been tobacco and soybeans was now crowded with lookalike homes and sun-parched lawns, where not even the constant chittering of sprinklers could keep the grass from browning in summer. There was a billboard above I-24—McCracken County Dream Homes, with a number you could call. This is what Kathy had, a vinyl-sided prefab, much like all the others on the street. They delivered your Dream Home to you in pieces, fitted them together, and then you had a place to live. There were thousands going up like that in Kentucky, more respectable than a mobile home, if only slightly. Make your dreams come true, said the billboard, and that's what everyone seemed to think they were doing. Their dreams were readymade and easy to