



SCENE

ONLINE COMICS
Artist creates 'Suburban Tribe'

INSIDE SCENE

8-page dining guide



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The Courier-Journal

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IN SPORTS, C1

Even before he won an Olympic gold medal in

Torch caused mine blast, lawyer says

Leaking methane ignited; five died

By James R. Carroll
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The Courier-Journal

WASHINGTON — Miners cutting a metal roof strap with a torch ignited leaking methane and touched off the May 20 explosion at an Eastern Kentucky mine that killed five, according

to a lawyer who took part in the federal investigation.

"Cutting a strap with a torch was the likely cause of the accident," lawyer Tony Oppgaard said yesterday.

In two related developments, government documents filed in federal court in Washington show the oxygen-generating devices worn by some of the killed miners were not fully expended.

And Kentucky officials have subpoenaed four Darby employees for more questioning

next week about the blast at the Holmes Mill mine.

A spokesman for the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration declined to comment on the conclusion drawn by Oppgaard, who is representing families of four of the five dead miners.

"MSHA is conducting a thorough investigation into the tragic accident at Darby Mine No. 1, and it would be premature to speculate about the cause of this accident until our investigation



"Cutting a strap with a torch was the likely cause of the accident," lawyer Tony Oppgaard said.

is completed," spokesman Dirk Fillpot said.

But Oppgaard said testimony before MSHA investigators points to a cutting torch igniting

methane that had leaked through a seal.

Testimony showed that metal straps intersected the seals, which could cause a leak, he said.

State and federal officials have said that preliminary evidence showed the failure of a seal used to block off an idle mine section. The seal was supposed to keep methane out of the active part of the mine.

See **MINE**, A5, col. 1

NO EASY WAY BACK

"I thought I was coming home. But everything was different."

HERMAN DOUGLAS MAY, who served 13 years in a Kentucky prison on a conviction in a sexual assault case before DNA evidence led to his release in 2002

Terror suspects fooled

Scene

**IN THE PULLOUT
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— but is it good?**

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Drawing on his life

**John Lee mines his angst
and imagination for an online strip**

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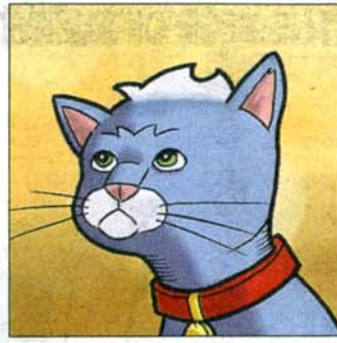
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Disarmingly disillusioned Alan



Lovesick airhead Carol



Non-talking Caesar



Cranky consumer Tiffany



Chain-smoker Dave

By Tamara Ikenberg
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The Courier-Journal

The "Suburban Tribe" is a dysfunctional cartoon "family" of friends who work together, drink together and occasionally sleep together. They sometimes eat cat food to save on grocery bills, are addicted to Marshmallow Peeps and often feel that their contributions to their employer, the Yesman & Puckerup ad agency, are not appreciated.

John Lee, 33, who calls the shots in this mad world of advertising and alcohol, is a self-employed ad and graphics man from Shepherdsville, Ky., who made the most of a 2002 layoff from Louisville's Kleier Communications Inc. He used the nine months he had between jobs to conceive and deliver the disarmingly disillusioned Alan, cranky conspicuous consumer Tiffany, lovesick air-

head Carol, bearish chain-smoker Dave and the other stars of his intelligent Internet strip.

"I saw online that there were several artists creating comic strips on the Web, and they were making a living, and I thought, 'Well, this will be easy,'" says Lee, who lives in Jeffersontown with his wife, Eve.

He was encouraged by classic Internet strips that spread in the late '90s and centered on geeks and tech, such as Scott Kurtz's "PvP," "Penny Arcade" by Jerry Holkins and Mike Kra-

hulik and J.D. Frazer's "User Friendly."

"About five or six of them were making a living and paying the bills. I wanted to jump in," he says. "I was always interested in serial television, like 'The X-Files' and 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer,' always wanting to see where the story was going to connect."

"Suburban Tribe" daily draws 1,600 to 1,800 readers who appreciate Lee's storytelling style.

"I like that he had these long storylines that he'd really planned out," says Old Louisville resident and "Tribe" fan Kelly Peters, 21. The characters "have

problems and their little quirks and they're not perfect, and just watching them try to get along with each other is really funny."

Lee has just transformed "Tribe" into an official comic book for the first time. On the cover, Alan's dream girl, super spy Haley Bhairavi (inspired by Bollywood beauty Aishwarya Rai), sword-fights with a clone of herself, who is really Carol.

It's too hard to explain without reading the book, which is available through Lee's Web site, suburbantribe.net, and at The Zone on Shelbyville Road.

"It's a good-looking book. The art is very nice and polished," says Joe Elder, owner of The Zone. "John's been a customer of ours for a long time, so that was a factor too."

The artist at work

Lee's deftness at drawing comes from years of experience.

"I just started when I was very young. I had an aptitude and just stuck with it all the way through college" at Western Kentucky University, Lee says.

"I took a lot of fine-arts classes in college. When I got out of college with a graphic design degree, everything went to computer, and there were years when I didn't pick up a pencil."

Now, he pencil-draws the strip, then scans it into his computer and inks it in with Corel Painter. He perfects it and adds the dialogue with Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. One online panel can take up to five hours to complete.

Lee's sweeping comic knowledge is evident. He brings to "Suburban Tribe" an "Adult Swim" and Kevin Smith sensibility, mixed with the close-knit feel of "Peanuts," "Archie" and other strips that spotlight cliques of people who simultaneously taunt and support one another.

"Peanuts" playthings, a toy Spider-Man and bookshelves filled with comics decorate Lee's neat-yet-playful home studio; it's the spacious suburban counterpart of Banky's cramped workspace in "Chasing Amy." Perched above Lee's

Join the Tribe

Meet the online comic-strip artist who's created his own cool world



John Lee, 33, is the creator of "Suburban Tribe." The strip draws 1,600 to 1,800 online readers each day.

Photos by Michael Hayman,
The Courier-Journal



One online panel can take up to five hours for Lee to complete.

Photos by Michael Hayman, The Courier-Journal



computer are plastic Silent Bob and Dante figurines from "Clerks."

"Everybody says Kevin Smith captures Gen-X, and that's true. (His work) is honest, and more than anything, it's about the people," Lee says. "He wrote a Spider-Man miniseries of comic books, and the great thing about it was he zeroed in on Spider-Man and this other character called the Black Cat. It's really compelling, because he has such a grasp of story; he focuses in on the characters. The over-arching thing wasn't this drawn-out, sci-fi, undecipherable stuff. It was about Spider-Man."

Lee may know his esoteric comic miniseries, but he wasn't aware of a TV cartoon series called "Mission Hill" until his friends and fans of his strip started telling him it had a "Tribe"-like vibe. The quickly-canceled 1999 UPN cartoon, which has resurfaced in the Cartoon Network's "Adult Swim" segment, focuses on aimless hipster roommates including a stupid blue-haired beer-bonger named Andy; Posey, a ditzy yoga chick; and Kevin, a computer boy genius.

"When I created this, I'd never seen it ('Mission Hill'). When it finally came out on DVD last year, I picked it up. I can see the similarity, (but) Alan tries hard, (while) Andy just tries to get away with doing as little as possible."

Character study

Unlike Andy and Dante, Lee sticks to his self-imposed deadlines, producing three new online strips a week. Right now, the latest installment is coming to life on his computer screen. One side of the screen depicts a college flashback. Alan, looking a bit like Dave Navarro minus the tattoos and piercings, rings a sorority house doorbell with a wannabe-suave expression on his face.

"It's 1995, and it's a setup for how Alan ended up in this miserable ad agency and Carol can't turn his head," Lee says.



"Carol's attractive, and she's a big hit with the male readers. This is establishing exactly what happened between Carol and Alan. Today, they just met."

Despite Carol's popularity, Lee got so frustrated coming up with goofy punch lines for her one day that he killed her. "I wrote a storyline where Carol dumbered herself to death. She ended up out in the desert, and I dropped a satellite on her," he says. "People didn't like that." She was revived when the government pulled her out from under the satellite.

Next to the image of Alan at the sorority door, Tiffany's face fills the screen. The brunette workaholic has a perpetual stressed-out scowl.

"Tiffany is based on a person I worked with. She's a real exaggeration of her personality. She was always aggressive," Lee says. "I was just kind of thinking how there are all these workaholics in the American workplace, and they really get off on being there all the time, doing whatever it takes to take home a paycheck, going home and spending every bit of it and running up debt. She's kind of a commentary on that. She's ad-

'SUBURBAN TRIBE'

The strip: Read it at suburbantribe.net. New comics are posted Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

The book: You can order "Suburban Tribe No. 1" at the above Web site (\$5.25, which includes shipping) or get it at The Zone, 4121 Shelbyville Road, for \$3.99.

More online comics

Check out these online comics for more bitterness, pop-culture references and fun:

- ▶ "PvP": www.pvponline.com
- ▶ "Penny Arcade": www.penny-arcade.com (NOTE: Contains some adult language)
- ▶ "User Friendly": www.userfriendly.org

Lee has transformed "Suburban Tribe" into an official comic book. On the cover, super spy Haley Bhairavi battles a clone of herself, who is really Carol.

dicted to the material aspects of everything."

Alan is the character Lee relates to most. "Even my 8-year-old nephew knows I'm basically Alan with a few modifications," he says. "People are going to hate me for saying this, but if Charlie Brown had to grow up and was dealt the hand that I was, you'd have Alan."

If Alan is Charlie Brown, then his roommate, Dave, could be a grown-up Pig Pen — a hulking, highly intelligent computer programmer with bad hygiene but a refined taste in music who somehow sleeps with strippers.

"My favorite character is Dave, flat-out Dave," says "Tribe" fan Brandon Aten, 25, from St. Matthews. "The one where Dave thought Tiffany was a lesbian was a pretty good one."

Lee reveals that his friend Jeremy Graven, 30, who was also laid off from Kleier, is the model for Dave. Graven definitely sees himself in his "Tribe" brother. He recalled a strip where Alan discovers old food that's come to life in the fridge, and commands Dave to deal with it. Dave sticks it under his easy

chair. "I am a slob," Graven says. "... I would do something like that."

Then there's Caesar the cat, who Lee added in the hopes of increasing his chance of getting "Tribe" onto a newspaper comics page.

Caesar is "the only character that's completely cut from whole cloth," Lee says. But he had a set of Caesar rules to avoid over-cutesiness. The cat is "not gonna talk. There's just no way he's going to be anthropomorphic. He never has a thought bubble or says anything," Lee says. Instead, he hijacks Tiffany's computer to send badly written, inflammatory e-mails and to sell items, including a possessed baby doll, on eBay.

"His spelling errors crack me up," says Kelly Peters, who adds that Caesar is her favorite character.

The city of Louisville is also a recognizable character in "Suburban Tribe." "Every once in a while you catch a glimpse of the Irish Rover or another locale," says Aten, who's doing an internship in Michigan. "I've been relocated, and I can always go back and look and catch a glimpse of home."

In one story, Alan takes a job at the Victoria's Secret in St. Matthews, with disastrous results. And when the gang books Catherine Zeta-Jones to appear in a commercial, they get her a room at The Brown hotel. Never mind that Zeta-Jones calls Louisville "a third-world hell-hole."

Lee's dream that the Tribesters will support him and Eve hasn't come true yet. His attempts to sell his strip to newspaper cartoon syndicates have all ended in rejection. It's disappointing, but not enough to stop his creative flow, especially when he considers the gulf between today's funny pages and the modern reader.

"Who's the audience for Beetle Bailey? Because it can't be the guys over in Iraq," Lee asks. "If Beetle Bailey went to Iraq, now I'd read that. But he's constantly on that base. Wouldn't he have been discharged by now?"

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