

WHAT'S
FUN
NOW!



ALMOST FAMOUS

BY MIKE AQUINO!

WHEREVER I GO, SHE FOLLOWS. Today she was peeking out from behind a dentist's office, showing off her impeccable pearly whites. Yesterday, she followed me to the bank. I caught her peering over the manager's shoulder, hawking high-interest savings. She trails me to Facebook, too: there she is on my newsfeed, selling vacations to Tuscany.

You've probably seen her, too: her slightly-too-wide smile beaming out from behind a delivery truck, her amiable goofiness klutzing up a web article, her trim physique pumping up potential fitness club clients. She's the Unknown Model: the darling of the stock photography world, engaged in everything from mobile phones to haute cuisine to credit cards to liposuction.

The Unknown Model is the ultimate mercenary, never tiring from her many adventures—not a nail chipped, not a hair out of place. Advertising clients love her. Ad agencies and target markets view her with skepticism and not a little frustration.

"She is everywhere!" a friend complains when I point her out. "You'd think she's the only model in the entire planet of Getty Images. What's up with that?"

Advertising clients, for one, think she's the best deal in the world. Clients feeling the crunch of shrinking marketing budgets turn to microstock vendors like Shutterstock and iStockPhoto to populate their materials with shiny, happy people: slap a logo or a product beside their glamorous faces and you have got yourself a campaign. Royalty-free stock photos sell for as low as \$0.99 per shot, and come free of expensive complications like model releases.

But clients who buy royalty-free images do not pay for their exclusive use—so any other client, even direct competitors, can purchase the same images (or images with the same model) and use it for their own materials. Ad agencies disdain royalty-free images for that reason: a unique concept using stock shots runs the risk of becoming a generic hey-I've-seen-this-before. (Not to mention that stock photo usage reduces the income ad agencies make off of producing their own photography.)

Asian ad agencies face an additional difficulty. Clients searching microstock sites for a glamorous, Asian face of indeterminate ethnicity quickly realize that one face pops up with tiresome regularity: the Unknown Model's.

Singaporeans have made a game out of Unknown Model-spotting. A short-lived Wordpress blog, rather uncharitably titled "Overexposed Big Mouth Model," quickly went viral before mysteriously shutting down less than a few weeks later. Copycat blogs like Overexposed Model (overexposedmodel.tumblr.com) have since picked up the slack.

"I was hoping I could submit some user submissions [to Overexposed Big Mouth Model], because I see her everywhere as well," explains Liao Yun Qing, a Malaysian tech journalist based in Singapore, who set up Overexposed Model after her inspiration disappeared from the Web. "When they took down the site, I was quite disappointed, so I started my own Tumblr."

The Model seems to have made an even bigger splash in advertising-saturated Singapore, where the combination of tightening marketing belts and a love of Eurasian talents has guaranteed her presence almost everywhere you look. "You're not sure what race she is—she's a bit racially ambiguous, and she's also quite glamorous," explains Yun Qing. "In Singapore, and in Malaysia as well, there's a trend to hire 'Pan-Asian' artistes—you can't tell if she's

part Chinese or just a really good looking Malay person."

For someone who's about as omnipresent as God, you'd think she'd be easier to track down. Outside the world of iStockphoto and Shutterstock, though, the Unknown Model is a tough catch.

The photographer who supplies the Model's face to the world goes by "Maridav," and the profile provides no contact details. I hit a dead end until a user on Reddit.com tells me of a second Shutterstock profile hawking the Model's images—"Ariwasabi," mercifully, has their email address on the profile.

"Ariwasabi" gets back to me a few days after my first polite inquiry. The reply is just as polite, if a little guarded: the people behind the Model like their privacy, but would be happy to answer my questions. Finally, there are names to go with the face. Martin, the photographer. Ariane, the model. Unknown no more.

Ariane and Martin run a full-time operation. Starting as a mutual amateur effort in 2005, the couple have since graduated to producing around 200 images a month: "We have around 4,000 images online," Martin admits. "We have a fully equipped studio dedicated to stock image production."

The star of the show, Ariane, is an equal partner in the enterprise: she and Martin brainstorm for the shoots and take turns directing them. Wardrobe and makeup are her department. "Modeling is only a small part of what I do," says Ariane. "Now I also have control of the entire creative process, from the idea stage to the end product. It is definitely not coming with better hours, but it's in many ways much more fulfilling!"

Ariane grew up in Canada, the child of "a French-Canadian dad and a Chinese mother—I was lucky to grow up in a very multicultural environment," she tells us. "I was doing modeling contracts during my studies [Ariane has a law degree], before we started producing our stock photos. I only worked part time [for] about five to six years. I actually did editorials for Cosmopolitan and Marie-Claire China."

Their stock photo gig permits Ariane to expand her acting horizons, at least far more so than Cosmo or Marie-Claire would allow. "It's actually something I felt was missing from my modeling contracts," explains Ariane. "It was always serious, no smiles, when me, I like to smile so much!"

Living so far from Singapore and Manila, Ariane and Martin have no clue of the hall-of-fame pervasiveness attained by the former's wide-smiling face in this part of the world. "I am not so sure that I am yet recognizable for the average magazine reader," Ariane says. "I am a shy person by nature, so of course I would be very surprised [...] to have someone coming up to tell me they recognized me."

I have a vision of Martin and Ariane visiting the region ("We are planning a trip to Hong Kong this year," Martin tells me) and being surprised by Ariane's face, smiling from every flat surface, as they step out of the cab. I'd love to ask them questions afterward: How long did you go without spotting Ariane? Were you recognized on the street? Did you feel you could be a private person in a place like this, where your face looms everywhere, Big Brother-like... where you're practically a celebrity without a name?

For now, safely insulated from the Unknown-Model-saturated media landscape of our part of the world, Ariane is unfazed. "I would love it! I think seeing myself on a big sign anywhere in Asia would make me feel I achieved a personal goal." If she only knew.