Creeping amid the catwalks

by Norma Meyer

LOS ANGELES - Since winning "America's Next Top Model," fresh-faced, blond, 22-year-old CariDee English has been thrust into the glossy high-fashion world of catwalks, couture and - yes, Miss Tyra - Armani-clad sleazeballs hoping to rub up against the glamorous game.

"I still meet people who say, 'Oh, I'd love to work with you.' You can tell they're creeps," shudders English, a North Dakota-bred former nanny whose TV prize last December included a modeling contract with prestigious Elite. "You don't need to sell yourself or to sell your body."

Given that the modeling industry traffics in beautiful flesh, English's advice sounds a bit gee-whiz. The brutal business has long been tarred with tales of fashionista drug abuse and anorexia to achieve that skin-and-bones look. But another ugly side beneath the glitter - young women and men who are sexually preyed upon - has gotten less attention than the new labels on the runways of Milan.

That is, until the recent case of celebrity fashion designer Anand Jon, who appeared on a couple episodes of "Top Model" several seasons before English competed, and who counts as his clients everyone from Paris Hilton to Donald Trump to Mary J. Blige and Jordan's Queen Noor. Last year at this time, the 33-year-old self-promoting party boy was at New York Fashion Week unveiling his latest collection - which included $340 hand-embroidered Jeanisis jeans - while former "Lost" star and pal Michelle Rodriguez looked after his 6-month-old panther, Maya, backstage.

These days, the Indian-born clothier sits in a Los Angeles jail, awaiting trial on 46 counts involving the alleged sexual assault of 18 aspiring female models as young as 14 years old. He is scheduled to appear Tuesday in a Beverly Hills courtroom, where a judge is expected to set a preliminary hearing date. Jon's sister, Sanjana, who is also a New York-based fashion designer, says her brother is being "crucified" by false allegations and suggests his accusers are part of a "conspiracy" to take him down.

Although she won't get into details, Sanjana Jon says, "For us, it is very easy to look at it and see why it is happening. You can be easily targeted if you are a straight designer."

She adds: "We come from a culture that respects women. He doesn't smoke. He doesn't drink or do drugs. He's very spiritual. He does yoga." As the only man in the family, her brother has cared for her and their mother since he was 16, she says.

Los Angeles prosecutors have a far different view of the dark-haired defendant, who just months before his March arrest was hailed by Newsweek as one of its "Who's Next in 2007" people to watch.

"We consider him a serial sexual predator," says district attorney spokeswoman Jane Robison. According to the criminal complaint, Jon had a long-running problem - the alleged offenses date back to November 2002 and span more than four years.

"He used the Internet to meet and attract young women to allegedly model for him. Once they came to L.A., he allegedly sexually assaulted them," Robison says.

The charges against Jon - which include forcible rape, sexual penetration by a foreign object, sodomy by use of force and lewd act upon a child - are a bombshell compared with decades-old whispers of a casting couch on various levels of the modeling biz.

"Oh hell yes, it exists!" exclaims Janice Dickinson, the "world's first supermodel," who graced scores of Vogue and other magazine covers. "I have a 13-year-old daughter, and thank God, she doesn't want to be a model. I would never leave her alone with anyone."

Now 52, the outspoken diva is currently filming the third season of her Oxygen network reality show, "The Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency," in Hollywood. She notes that participants have been asked to strip down for "the right reason" - a legitimate photo shoot - and that over her long career she balked at getting naked when she suspected ulterior motives.

Once, she says, the late famed photographer Helmut Newton asked her to take off her clothes, and "I told him to (expletive) himself. I thought he was an old pervert. He told me I'd never work in this industry again."

Dickinson was a former judge on "Top Model," but says she didn't know Jon and wasn't aware of the charges against him. "If I did, I'd go over and kick him in the ... ," she rants,using a crude term for a man's private parts.

Both the Better Business Bureau and the Federal Trade Commission document complaints of wannabes who contend they've been scammed out of money while pursuing modeling careers. But no agency, including the FBI and the California Attorney General's Office, appears to keep stats on alleged sexual wrongdoing in the fashion trade.

"We're talking about an industry that's not very well policed," says supermodel Roshumba Williams, 39, who was strutting down Paris runways when she was 18.

Modeling hopefuls are often in their teens and may not come forward out of shame or fear of derailing their dreams. "You have young, beautiful people who are willing to do anything to get their foot in the door. I mean anything," says Williams, who penned the how-to "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Being a Model."

She recalls "lots of creeps along the way" of her career, which launched when Yves Saint Laurent hired her as a model in France. At nightclubs after work, Williams says she witnessed hard-partying model girlfriends become incoherent or pass out from drugs slipped into their drinks by wealthy French and Italian playboys who sought to take advantage of them.

"Modeling is a sausage factory, and some girls get chewed up and spit out," says Michael Gross, who chronicled the industry's scandalous jet-setting top echelon in his best-seller, "Model: The Ugly Business of Beautiful Women."

"Sometimes, there's a casting couch. Sometimes young women are pushed toward it, and sometimes they hop on it easily. Passing through the bed of a top photographer or a top agent is a savvy career move if you're equipped to handle it. For others, they crash and burn."

Of course, the odds of ever swooshing down a catwalk in Chanel or staring out from the airbrushed cover of Elle are slim to none. In modeling's more shady bottom-feeder sphere, there's another bunch of potential predators, like the "photographer" who approaches girls at shopping malls. In Connecticut, a 43-year-old owner of a local modeling agency recently pleaded guilty to sexually assaulting a 14-year-old client in a nearby abortion clinic where he also worked as a janitor.

Dickinson's on-air makeup artist, Gabe Geismar, has his own personal horror story of coming to Los Angeles from New Jersey at age 18 to become a model or actor. "I got forced into a prostitution ring," he says.

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About eight years ago, Geismar says he answered an ad in the back of a weekly newspaper and soon moved into a posh hotel with an "agent" who promised him and others fame, but instead fed them the date-rape drugs GHB and Rohyprol. Within weeks, Geismar says he was totally zoned out, imprisoned in a dog kennel in a squalid house, and "basically doing everything" he was told, including porn. "That's the extreme case. But this happens," Geismar cautions. "It's dangerous. On the (Janice Dickinson) show, we see girls come in all the time and even the boys with these creepy personal managers. I think, 'Oh God, please don't be the next one.' One minute, you're a model at a car show and before you know it, you're going out to dinner with a client - you're a prostitute."

The starry-eyed may put themselves at risk "because you have a dream and you'll do anything to follow the dream. You don't want to go home and tell your parents you failed," Geismar says.

"Top Model" English warns that young women going to meet agents or to do a photo shoot should "always bring a friend, always, always," just as she did when she picked up small jobs in her hometown of Fargo, N.D. That was before she won Cycle 7 of "Top Model" and became a face of CoverGirl cosmetics, as well as a spokeswoman for the National Psoriasis Foundation, a skin disease she's suffered since childhood.

English says she never met Jon, but he too was a rising star who grabbed the brass ring. With an East-meets-West line that included a Lotus petal wedding gown and black leather Banjara hot pants, the high-flying Jon was often photographed flanked by modeling babes.

"He always had beautiful women surrounding him," says sister Sanjana, pointing out the designer didn't "need" to force himself on anyone.

Ronald Richards, a former attorney for Jon, has portrayed some of his accusers as disgruntled models who were angry when they didn't get jobs.

As he sits in his cell, Jon's design house Web site remains up and running. His breathless bio boasts that in 2004 he was named one of the "Sexiest South Asian Men in America" by an online fashion magazine. A photo gallery shows him mingling at VIP events with celebs including Jessica Alba and Goldie Hawn.

In the criminal case that could put him away for life, the clothing guru reportedly met some alleged victims through more common means - MySpace. His fans and family now have a "We Support Anand Jon" page on MySpace.

"He says, 'God is with us,' " Sanjana Jon relates. "The truth has to come to light."

If the truth - as she sees it - eventually surfaces in Los Angeles, her brother's legal troubles might not be over. Dallas authorities have issued three warrants for Jon, alleging he sexually assaulted three women there, including one younger than 17.

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