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Ordeal by Fire by Emily Green

At 11, Michael 'Mini' Cooper was famous, the cherubic child-arsonist who stole everybody's hearts in a TV documentary. In and out of care, at 21, he starred again, snatching glimpses of a glamorous life beyond his means. At 27, he was still just 'the arsonist on the telly' - and then he started another fire

"MINI" COOPER was 10 years old when he carefully set kindling in several rooms at his home in Craghead, a tiny mining village in County Durham. To this day he insists he thought the house was empty, but he found differently when he watched his father escape naked to the roof of the burning building and dance in panic.

By 11, Mini was Britain's most popular arsonist. Appearances helped: an early psychiatric report describes him as a "diminutive boy with an angelic face . . . a most presentable youngster", and it was this battered cherub who made such an impression on television. In a 1975 BBC documentary, his fire-lighting looked every inch the defiant protest of a boy who had somehow found himself in the wrong life. Quick-witted in a plodding family, an agnostic among Roman Catholics, a delicate boy in a pit village: Mini was David against Goliath - except David lost. This did not dispel the media's interest. When Mini emerged from a decade of psychiatric care, a stooped and eerily wrinkled 21-year-old, a second BBC film was devoted to him.

Now, at 27, Mini is newly married to Marilyn Donner, a divorcee and mother of two young sons. Marilyn is nine years older than Mini and fell in love with him after seeing the second film. But this is no happy ending. Mini is currently in HM Prison Lincoln. No one was injured in the fire he started last September in a Mansfield industrial yard. It was his first in almost 20 years, and his only adult crime. Theoretically, Mini could have received a five-to-seven year sentence. In fact he got life.

As the lawyers and psychiatrists move in for the appeals procedure, making noises about "psychopathic disorders", and his new barrister eloquently contests discretionary life sentencing and judicial inequities, Mini is left to nurse his fantasies. The fantasies got him into all this. He wanted to be somebody. Somebody famous.

BORN Michael Cooper on 23 August 1963, Mini was nicknamed after the most successful rally car of the day. At the age of three he was sent to his grandmother for six weeks while his younger sister was born. He didn't want to return home; when he did, he began "wandering" and lit what was to be his first fire - burning a toy aeroplane.

He was devoted to his mother, but wilfully provoked his father - who responded, according to Mini, with a clenched fist. "If they the children do wrong," his father says in the first film, "they've got to be punished. And I always punish them if they do wrong - hard."

But thrashing never worked. By eight Mini had lit fires at home, and - as he conceded in the first film - was "nicking things" and "doing the bunk". When he was strapped by nuns for refusing to pray at St Mary's Roman Catholic Church School in Craghead, Mini set fire to the altar and was sent to the Redworth Hall Residential School for Maladjusted Children near Newton Aycliffe. He absconded 18 times. On home leave, he set fire to his family home while his father was asleep inside. On 12 June 1974, Durham County Council issued a care order; two weeks later he was admitted to a special assessment centre, Aycliffe School, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, for evaluation by a panel of psychiatrists, psychologists, teachers and social workers.

Mini had been awaiting assessment for several months when Franc Roddam, a young television director from the BBC documentary series *Inside Story*, appeared. Today, Roddam divides his time between London and Los Angeles; he produces the BBC cookshow *Masterchef* and his feature film credits include *Quadrophenia* and *The Bride*. In 1974, however, setting out on his second film, he was steeped in social realism and interested in scrutinising the assessment process that determines the fate of a juvenile psychiatric delinquent.

Administrators at Aycliffe, Roddam recalls, were "very keen" on a film being made. They were keener yet that it focus on Mini. "People at the centre," Roddam says, "seemed almost to promote him as this kind of slightly dangerous character who was rather wonderful."

For three weeks, the cameras followed Mini to bed, to church, to class, to therapy and on home visits. Counsellors at Aycliffe had already observed that Mini thrived among adults. He positively blossomed with the film crew. "He had this incredible alertness and questioning quality," Roddam says. "This brightness. He liked sparring with the psychologists and social workers. He was very professional in dealing with psychiatrists."

Mini faced interrogation by the psychologists with composure.

"Do you think building fires is a good thing to do?" one asked.

"To me it is, but to other people, it's not," Mini answered evenly. "Because people don't like having fires set all over the place."

Some questions were extraordinarily leading: "You didn't like that school you were in. Did you ever think about burning it?"

"No - too many kids in there."

Would he burn a neighbour's home? No. Would he burn a shed? Yes. "Nothing valuable in a shed." What drew him to fire? "I just like the flames."

The psychologists had to determine whether or not, in their opinion, Mini was dangerous. He had not only set fire to his home with his father inside, but a few months later he returned to the gutted house and lit it up again.

Recent research points to trauma at the birth of a younger sibling and to family separations as triggers for child arson. At the time there were clues to Mini's motives: "Michael comes from a home where there is considerable marital strife," said an Aycliffe report. Violence was more like it. On film, Mini describes watching his father throttling his mother. And there was Mini's fierce sense of justice: he wanted to beat the system that beat him.

Mini's saga made potent television. "I tried to construct the film in such a way so that just as you are deciding that he should be out, they are deciding that he should be in," Roddam says. It worked. Among those affected was Sam Peckinpah, the distinguished American film director. A framed letter from Peckinpah hangs in Roddam's London home. "The child has great potential," he wrote, "the problem being obviously more a question of hyper-intelligence than anything else. Channelled in the right way he could grow up to be someone with a valuable contribution to society." Or, he warned, "Channelled in the wrong way, his life could be a disaster."

Peckinpah asked to be kept informed as to Mini's progress, but it was not long before Roddam himself was persuaded to sever the link. After the film crew left, Mini made more than a dozen daring escapes from high security centres, jumping trains to London. Roddam would get a call from British Rail security that they had his "nephew". Roddam would urge Mini to turn himself in, putting him on a train back to the north, but Mini would inevitably jump back off. Eventually Mini's caretakers insisted that Roddam break contact.

From a series of special schools, each one more secure than the next, at 15, Mini went to Moss Side Hospital, the special hospital managed by the Home Office in Liverpool. There, according to Mini's social worker Peter Thornhill, attendants called him a kind, gentle boy. At 20, in 1983, he was moved to the Eastdale Unit in Newark, a rehabilitation unit designed to prime him for entry into society. He remained for a year, before moving on to Bancroft House, a psychiatric aftercare hostel in Mansfield. Off his own bat, he found a brief and happy job in a

Christmas pantomime at the Mansfield Civic Theatre: he played the magician in Aladdin, performing tricks he had learnt while in care.

It was in 1984, while he was in Bancroft House, that Mini renewed contact with Roddam. "It was shocking for me when he came out," Roddam says. "He was a bit of a beaten character." Roddam got Mini a day's work as an extra on *The Bride*, a Frankenstein film starring Sting, and took him for his first meal in a restaurant - steak and creme brulee at Julie's, a chic wine bar near Roddam's home in Notting Hill. Here Roddam introduced Mini to his friend and neighbour, Philippa Walker, a BBC director. Over dinner Walker mooted the idea of a second film, this time a documentary for 40 Minutes - Mini's coming out.

Mini was delighted. The second film begins with a taut, wizened boy watching for the first time the documentary made of his negative assessment some 10 years' earlier. Where Roddam's film is harrowing, Walker's is simply dismal. It trails Mini working up a comedy-magic act that sank like a stone in working men's clubs. It concludes with Mini as a morose entertainer at a children's camp. Peter Thornhill questions the effect of the second film on Mini. "It was all so exciting going into those clubs with the film crew when it was very far from reality," he says. "When Mini was actually on his own, he couldn't cope."

At 21, Mini couldn't boil a kettle. He was socially maladroit. He had no academic qualifications. There is evidence, according to his solicitor, that he had had pubescent homosexual encounters while in care; heterosexually, he was, very probably, a virgin. Shortly after the film, suffering clinical depression, he left the Mansfield hostel and re-admitted himself to the Eastdale Unit in Newark.

The day after Philippa Walker's film was shown, in November 1985, Marilyn Donner wrote to Mini from her home in Braintree, Essex. "I woke up crying the morning after seeing the film," she says. She sent the letter care of Walker, who, with some reservations, forwarded it. Mini replied within a fortnight. A correspondence ensued, and then a love-affair. When the couple met for the first time, at her home, Mini was chaperoned by Peter Thornhill.

In autumn 1987, Marilyn moved with her two sons to Leicester, where Mini was briefly attached to a local theatre. Six months later, she followed him to Mansfield. She is still there, living in a neat suburb of well-tended semis with her sons Paul and Nicky, now 14 and seven and their collie. The boys are bright, friendly, and well established in the neighbourhood network. .

Such an innocuous setting only fuels the speculation about Marylin. All but a few of Mini's closest friends still wonder incredulously: what was it she could see in him?

Marilyn Donner is a petite, grey-eyed blonde. Nursing a mug of tea, curled up in a huge grey armchair, she speaks slowly and patiently in a soft voice, a voice of determined reasonableness. To her, Mini is Min. "Min has been labelled a psychopath," she says. "It's just not true. A psychopath is incapable of remorse, or emotion. Min's a very emotional, very caring person. I know that." Marilyn speaks with practical as well as personal enthusiasm: she is studying to become a psychiatric nurse at the Queen's Medical Centre in Nottingham.

Once released, Mini struggled with his special-ness. While living in Bancroft House, in 1986, encouraged by, among others, Walker and Roddam, he wrote a comic novella, *Living Proof There's Life After Death*, a neatly typed 94-page exercise in absurdism. The result was edgy and raw, consisting of a long string of pained jokes about Bobby Rogers, a lonely misfit born, wearing a full set of false teeth, to dead parents. Mini was forever disguising anguish with humour. He needed it to cope with poverty in Mansfield.

By spring 1986, he had been allotted a council flat on the tough, desolate Bellamy Road Estate. He had been plagued by the possibility of mandatory recall into care, but in November 1987 he received an unconditional release, secured by Paul Bacon, who still represents him. Mini was free. Peter Thornhill thought Mini needed some sort of supervision and voluntarily kept in contact with him.

MINI'S AFFAIR with Marilyn floundered concurrently with his career as a budding young playwright. In the autumn of 1987, as Mini received his unconditional release, Philippa Walker introduced him to David Gothard, who was then putting together a renegade artistic regime at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester. Gothard's reputation as a talent-spotter was well-deserved. One of the founders of the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith, west London, he had introduced dazzling Europeans such as Dario Fo and Tadeusz Kantor to Britain, nurtured the young playwright Hanif Kureishi, and launched the directors David Leveaux and Simon Usher (now at the RSC and National Theatre respectively).

Gothard never promised Mini stardom; he merely opened doors. But, according to Marilyn, Mini thought his ship had come in. "I think Min saw the Haymarket as Utopia, as the place he would make a name for himself, as the stepping stone to his Bafta award."

Minders in Mansfield were relieved that Mini seemed to have found a job. In fact, according to Marilyn, after she moved to Mansfield, Mini was regularly making the gruelling journey, via Lincoln, with nowhere to doss in Leicester, for mere expenses. He was briefly used as a runner on a small studio production by a novice director, Keith Boak. Boak considered working on a production with Mini, then it fizzled.

Meanwhile Mini scribbled play after play, most of which are now lost or in storage. "Mini used to get very depressed," said Marilyn. "He was running backwards and forwards and doing re-writes." Only Simon Usher, who briefly acted as the theatre's literary advisor before going on to direct, worked seriously with him.

Like any rank amateur, Mini was a bit of a sponge. According to Usher, his early scripts adopted the tone of whatever production was then rehearsing. Most were near incomprehensible, a result, Usher thinks, of Mini's increasingly desperate desire to please.

Early in 1988, just when stage denied, screen beckoned. Via David Gothard, Mini was offered one of a series of short films being produced by the London company Working Title (producers of Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette*), with Usher to direct. He wrote what Usher thought his best work - a dialogue with a boy who has just burned the family home down.

For meetings, Mini took the train to London, bouncing around Soho with a copy of *Screen International* under his arm. But, overexcited, he acted up in script sessions. Working Title then cast the film and built the set - without the involvement of Mini or Usher. Stephen Garrett, commissioning editor for youth programmes at Channel 4, previewed the film and declared "the boy is wrong". There were other faults. "The script always had terrible problems," Garrett says today. "It was fragmented and over ambitious." Everyone involved wanted to make it work in the face of what, with hindsight, look insuperable odds. Had it been written by someone without Mini's background, it probably would not have got as far as it did." The film was scrapped. Mini returned to Mansfield.

His decline was steep and steady. His drinking increased. He took to chastising Marilyn's children. According to Usher, who was one of the few from Leicester to keep in contact with Mini, guilt at this had a devastating ring: like father, like son. Marilyn agrees. "He does get into very deep, depressive states when he feels things are hopeless," she says. "It's a depression that he knows is happening to him, but he can't seem to control it. Then the drink fin-

ishes him."

In April 1989, she kicked him out. He was again diagnosed as suffering clinical depression and prescribed anti-depressants, which he combined with alcohol.

"No drink" is scribbled through various pages of his diary in the months that followed, as he struggled to stop drinking and pull his life together. Briefly, he succeeded, staying sober, paying bills promptly. He called Marilyn frequently for support. "He tried so damn hard, then everything just collapsed in on him," she

says.

On Saturday night, 22 September 1990, Mini drank heavily with his family at the Bellamy Road Estate social club. Drunk and agitated, he gate-crashed a party where he was recognised as "the arsonist from the telly". Finally ejected, in the early hours of Sunday morning he made his way across the road to the neighbouring A G Barr bottling plant, which looms over the estate. Mini, like many of the tenants, had worked there briefly.

He set fire to a mountain of crated plastic bottles - the size of a short terrace of two-storey houses - in the plant's yard. The bottles, covered by shrink-wrap polythene and stacked on wooden pallets, burned for a night and a day, causing somewhere between pounds 600,000 and pounds 750,000-worth of damage. A wall of the plant buckled from the heat; inside, a nightshift of 26 people worked.

When the case came up at Nottingham Crown Court on 1 February this year, Mini had resigned himself to a prison sentence. His solicitor, Paul Bacon, was in London for a press conference at the Law Society and the barrister whom Bacon had instructed was held over on another case so a second barrister was instructed.

Before the court were two psychiatric reports. Mini, according to the more damning of the two, had been "the subject of a number of different interventions over a significant period of years. All have failed to modify his behaviour in a way which reduces the risk of his committing a further offence. I do not believe that there is any treatment or approach which would have this result." Both reports were prepared by strangers when Mini was in detention after the fire, suffering from clinical depression; both relied heavily on Mini's childhood records.

Mini originally faced two charges: one count of burglary and one count of arson with intent to endanger life. The burglary charge was admitted. At the committal stage, Paul Bacon managed to reduce the arson charge from intent to the lesser charge of arson being reckless as to whether life was endangered. Mini entered a guilty plea to the recklessness charge because he was under the impression that he was likely to receive a five-to-seven year sentence, rather than the maximum, life. After the court broke for lunch, according to the court records, when Mini reappeared at 3.40pm, a life sentence was passed within 15 minutes.

The sentence shocked Mini, his family and his friends. "What Michael probably didn't recognise," Paul Bacon said during a tour past the fire site, "was the incendiary potential of the crates. Nor that the fire would in any way endanger plant workers."

Marilyn, who had not seen Mini for more than a year, rushed to him after the

arrest. Soon afterwards, he proposed. They were married on Monday 3 June at 2.30pm - a special slot reserved at Lincoln Town Hall for prisoners. Prison officers discreetly wore coats over their uniforms, and waited to handcuff Mini until he was back in the van. Among the guests were Mini's family, Usher, Roddam's wife Carina, and Philippa Walker, who made a wedding video.

An appeal looms. Mini's case has caught the attention of the Alan Meale, the NUM-sponsored Labour MP for Mansfield. Bacon has recently transferred the file to Edward Fitzgerald, a London-based barrister specialising in arson sentencing. A move for Mini from Lincoln to Gartree in Leicestershire or a new prison in Cambridgeshire is a possibility.

Just now, however, Mini has let his hair grow long. He dabbles with vegetarianism and is rake-thin. He has begun experiments with Buddhism and transcendental meditation. He reads Dostoevsky, and writes long, eloquent letters to Marilyn, Roddam, Walker, Gothard and Usher. His spirits picked up recently when he was given a cleaning job.

There is a thread of guilt running through his circle of friends. Usher is anguished by his part in what amounted to a demoralising dalliance with the theatre. Gothard, too, is uneasy, yet wonders if shutting him out of Leicester would have been any better. Philippa Walker says simply: "I think contact with people like us was good for Mini."

Peter Thornhill disagrees. "As a professional," he says, "I'm quite angry about it. We were doing some quite positive work which is easily undone by these kind of dazzling encounters."

"When he gets out, I want to give him a job on a film," Franc Roddam says, but he shares some of Thornhill's reservations. "If he's been dragged into the public by the media," he says, "then the media should help him. And that means me." He footed the bill for the latest psychiatric report in hope of a positive assessment.

All of Mini's friends believe he is redeemable. "For me, he was such a brilliant little child," says Roddam. "I still think he can be a brilliant adult." So, hope against hope, does Mini. Locked away, he is working on another play.

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