# 1

I've never been late for anything in my life, apart from my own birth.

When I made my entrance on 30 January 1963, I was three weeks overdue and Mum and Dad were on a day out in Bristol. Mum went into labour as they were about to go on a boat trip. Dad took her to the local hospital instead and, hours later, I was born. According to my mum, I didn't want to come out and had to be pulled and tugged and dragged. Stubborn, even then. No one remembers my exact weight, just that I was a big baby, about 8 pounds. They named me Christina Marie. I was Christina to my dad, Chris to my mum. I was so overdue I can't help wondering what my parents were doing having a day out in Bristol in the first place. You'd think they'd have wanted to stay close to home. Just in case. Years later, I took my mum to task about it and she said things were different back then, there weren't all the scans

you get now, and doctors weren't able to be as precise about when you were likely to give birth as they are today. Even so. Thinking about it, maybe it said something about my parents. Even as a child I knew they were unusual. Out of the ordinary, different.

Eccentric, you might say.

My dad, Francis Thomas Patrick Malone – Frank – was one of six children, five boys and a girl, and came from a very middle-class background. His father, John Joseph, was Irish, and his mother, Leonie, was French. Dad went to the best school in Liverpool, the Collegiate, and then to university. He spoke a ridiculous number of languages. We counted them up one day and got to seventeen. When I was about three, he would put foreign words and phrases on the walls and I'd sit there reciting *hello*, *good morning* and *welcome* in Romanian, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and umpteen other languages. When I was five he was teaching me the alphabet in Greek and Latin. His study was crammed with books, everything from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, to Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the collected works of Shakespeare. He played guitar, violin, mandolin, banjo and piano, and his musical tastes ranged from Fats Domino to Vivaldi and the Beatles. He loved American TV sitcoms, shows like *I Love Lucy*, *Abbott and Costello*, *Mister Ed*, and something called *Grindl* about the ups and downs of a domestic worker played by Imogene Coca. Grindl was his nickname for me when I was little, but because I couldn't say it properly it ended up Grimble. As a little girl, it seemed to me there was nothing he couldn't do and he made me believe anything was possible.

'You can be anything you want to be, have anything you want, if you work at it, Christina. *Anything*,' he said.

I absolutely adored him.

He was fair haired and blue eyed, tall, good looking and elegant, always in a suit. The night he met my mum he was in a club called the Iron Door, in Liverpool, playing the fruit machine when he hit the jackpot. As the coins thundered into the tray, a crowd gathered and Mum went to see what the fuss was about. Blonde and slim with a look of the actress who starred in the Hitchcock film *The Birds*, Tippi Hedren, Mum caught his eye and he ended up buying her a drink. She was eight years younger than him and intelligent, striking to look at, but nowhere near as well educated as he was. It didn't get in the way of them falling in love.

Olwyn Evans, as Mum then was, also came from a big family, of four girls and three boys. Her parents, Eric and Josephine, were ordinary and working class. I'd often stay at my nan's two-up, two-down in Berbice Road, in the Penny Lane area of Liverpool, while Mum and Dad went on holiday. The things that stick in my mind are loads of people coming and going, the back yard full of clutter and bikes and all sorts, lino on the floor, eating my dinner off my knee because there wasn't a dining table, and sitting with my nan plaiting strips of newspaper for the fire she lit every day before my grandad went to work. Nan was a feisty little Irish woman nicknamed Tiny. She was a devout Catholic with crucifixes on the walls and rosary beads on the door handles. No one was allowed in her front parlour except on Sundays in their church clothes before Mass. She wouldn't stand for bad language and if you stepped out of line she threatened to

wash out your mouth with carbolic soap. One of my earliest memories is of my mum's brothers coming home one day with an Alsatian and my nan going mad and yelling at them to get rid of it. I spent a fair bit of time there because once or twice a year my parents went away, just the two of them. I'd sit at the window and wave as they drove off to the airport to spend the weekend somewhere exotic, like Berlin or Paris or Vienna.

I grew up in a big Georgian house in Percy Street in Toxteth, Liverpool. We lived in a flat on the ground floor of number 20, although over the years my dad bought up the rest of the house, bit by bit, until the whole place was ours. It cost a grand total of £4,000, around £40,000 in today's money, although that wouldn't go anywhere near what our old house is now worth. It was on the market not so long ago for £850,000. In the sixties, Toxteth was buzzing, what you'd call eclectic. You got all kinds of people there, some wealthy, some with next to nothing, and lots of immigrants from places like the Caribbean and Africa. It was edgy, proper bohemian. Some of the houses near us had basement shebeens, illegal all-night drinking dens with makeshift bars and DJs playing blues and reggae. At one end of our street there were prostitutes and crackheads and, at the other end, doctors and poets and artistic types. My dad loved it. Since he was older and more worldly, my mum was happy to live wherever he wanted to be.

I started school in 1968. On my first day, Dad drove me to Birchfield Road Juniors, his old school, a few miles away from where we lived, in an area called Edge Lane. I didn't mind the idea of school. In fairness, I didn't know what it meant.

On the way, in the car, the radio was on, something lively with a beat, Dad humming along, me in my new school dress and cardigan. The week before, Mum had taken me to get my feet measured at the Clarks shop and it was the first time I'd worn my shiny new T-bar school shoes and white ankle socks. We pulled up at the gate in a brand new purple Ford Zephyr which, thinking about it, probably caused a bit of a stir. A new car was one thing. A big flashy purple one was really asking for trouble in that part of town, not that I knew it at the time. I skipped into the playground holding my dad's hand. There were lots of kids milling around and streaming into the building. Birchfield Road Juniors was a big school with hundreds of pupils. Dad let go of me.

'Off you go, Christina,' he said.

I grabbed on to his leg. It hadn't dawned on me he was actually planning to leave me there.

'Go on, you'll be fine, Grimble.' He tried to shake me off as other kids streamed past.

I held on tight.

He crouched down. 'You'll love it.'

I wasn't convinced and started crying, clinging on to his trousers.

'It's a lovely school. You'll have a great time,' he said, finally working my grip free.

Funnily enough, it wasn't going to school I was upset about, it was the thought of my dad leaving. Maybe I wasn't sure when, or if, he'd come back. Maybe somewhere deep down I was thinking about being at the window at my nan's and Mum and Dad going off, sometimes for a few days, sometimes longer. When you're little, you don't really understand things

like time and separation. Years later, a therapist said I had terrible abandonment issues. By the time my dad got me to let go, I'd managed to crease up his suit trousers, not that he seemed bothered. He dried my eyes, told me to be brave and said he'd see me later. I watched him go and went inside with the other kids.

He was right, I loved school. The headmistress, Mrs Morgan, grey-haired with glasses, was big and imposing, lovely. She always had a word for me. You know those kids, the ones that bring in little presents for the teachers? That was me. Dead keen, always first to put my hand up. I'd scribble away in my exercise book the second we were given something to do. If my English teacher, Mr Thomas, drew a squiggle on the blackboard and told us to use our imaginations and write a story about it, I'd be off, head down, filling the page, oblivious to the fact no one else was writing. I'd look up and everyone would be staring at me as if I was mad. I was the oddball, the misfit, the geeky kid. Before long, I was being picked on. Edge Lane was a poor part of town, big families with not much money living in tenement buildings. Even as a child I knew we weren't hard up. We had nice things. We went on holiday. My mum was forever taking me shopping, putting me in paisley-print dresses and matching cardies and Clarks shoes, while some of my classmates were in hand-me-downs and shoes that were shabby and dropping to bits. Some of the kids I mixed with were dirty. They had nits. And there was me rolling up every day in a car. A new car. God in heaven, a *purple Zephyr*. I got a load of abuse about that. Before long, I got my dad to drop me round the corner from the school in the morning so no one saw us.

Too late.

The bullies had me in their sights.

Walking through the playground I'd get a kick up the backside. One of the boys in my class hit me every day. One of the girls, Patricia Jones, made my life an absolute misery. Day in, day out, she got hold of me and punched me in the stomach, slapped me around the head, kicked me, pulled my hair. She was only tiny and practically swung off my plaits. One day she pulled out a clump of my hair. Patricia lived nearby and had loads of sisters and a scary-looking mum, a big woman with a shock of fluffy white hair, who made me think of one of those troll dolls people used to collect and hang round their necks. For her size, Patricia was ferocious and always had a couple of mean-looking friends with her. She would beat me up for anything. For nothing. I came back to school after one of the holidays with a tan. We'd been to Spain, I think. We often went abroad to places like Morocco and Spain, Romania even. Patricia demanded to know how I'd ended up so brown. I was probably only about seven, but somehow I knew not to say I'd had a fortnight in Lloret de Mar, so I lied and said we'd been to Gronant in Wales, camping. You couldn't get anything past Patricia. She was one of those hard, suspicious kids who'd punch you in the face soon as look at you. She got hold of me in the toilets. As far as she was concerned, no one comes back from a week in Wales the colour I was. Obviously, I'd been *abroad*. It was enough to get me battered. Again. I made the mistake of asking why she was picking on me the whole time. I must have thought I'd be able to talk her round. She found that very funny and the gang she hung about with

thought it hilarious, all of them having a right old laugh at my expense. Just so I'd know better than to ask any more stupid questions, Patricia gave me another good thumping.

Like I say, I was keen to learn, a bright child. Bright enough to work out that I had little in common with most of my classmates. It was obvious we had things at home that no one else at school had, like a car and a phone and a colour TV. I remember feeling embarrassed that we had an automatic washing machine when I realized that the people I was mixing with had some sort of twin tub, if they were lucky, or a spin dryer with a hose that went into the sink. I wished we did too. I made some good friends at Birchfield, Jean Gerrard and Jeanette Cook, who lived in terraced houses, two-up, two-down, with a toilet outside and a front parlour you weren't allowed to go in, like my nan's. No phone, no car, a little black-and-white television, a radio. It felt as if we lived in a mansion compared with them.

My friends had things like egg and chips for tea, sausage and chips, beans and chips. Chips with everything. We didn't even have a chip pan. I was mortified. Why couldn't we have a chip pan like everybody else? Both my parents cooked – things with spices, like Moroccan chicken stew. Embarrassing things, basically. My dad would make coleslaw. *Make* it. He'd be in the kitchen chopping and peeling, Jimi Hendrix on the stereo, or Bach or the Beatles, depending on what kind of mood he was in, garlic stinking the place out. No one I knew had even heard of garlic. We'd have things like spicy chicken with broccoli. Asparagus, avocado. Not that I dared tell anyone, because everyone else was having fish fingers and chips. Tinned peas were about as

adventurous as it got for most of my friends when it came to vegetables.

Both my parents worked, Dad as a private investigator, Mum as a tax inspector. A lot of what my dad did was knocking on doors serving writs and summonses. He had an assistant, Nobby Clark, an amazing-looking Jewish man who dressed in black and wore a hat and had his hair in traditional curls. Sometimes Dad took me along when they went on calls. He'd joke that he was a real-life Simon Templar, the detective played by Roger Moore in the TV series *The Saint*, and in fact he did have a look of Roger Moore about him. Me and Nobby were his sidekicks, he used to say. Dad would pull up in the Zephyr at some house and leave the engine running while he went and knocked on the door. Sometimes he'd get told to bugger off. I saw him chased by dogs or sometimes throwing the court papers over a locked gate and shouting, 'You are now served,' before sprinting back to the car and driving off in a hurry. I thought it was dead exciting. My dad was always well off and used to say he could make money in an empty room. I'm the same.

The reason they sent me to Birchfield Road Juniors rather than somewhere closer to where we lived was because it was where Dad went and it was handy for my nan, Leonie, and grandad, John. My parents were still at work when I finished school so I walked to my nan and grandad's house and had my tea there. It was only three streets from Birchfield and took about ten minutes, but I used to dread it. About the same time our bell went, so did the one for the boys at St Sebastian's, the Catholic school on Holly Road. I'd be the only one going their way. If I ran into them I'd get called

'posh' for being at Birchfield, maybe because I was always in nice clothes and new shoes. They'd push me round and give me a slap, empty my school bag. I was being battered at school and again on the way home. It got to the point where I came out of school and ran like mad. Sometimes I'd get to the top of Laburnum Road, in sight of my nan's house at the far end of the street, and feel my stomach knotting up. I used to think if I just kept running I'd make it, then a gang of St Sebastian's boys would come round the corner, heading my way and I knew I'd had it. In fairness, they never hurt me as much as Patricia Jones did.

My nan was tall and slim with an orderly house that smelled of bleach and polish. In the hall, in pride of place, was a picture of the French President, Charles de Gaulle, above a table with one of those heavy old black phones. She'd want to know what I'd done at school, what I'd learnt. We'd watch some TV, then she'd get out her stamp album and we'd go through her collection. If she had any new stamps we'd put them in. Somehow stamps from countries like Peru and Bolivia always seemed more colourful and exciting than ours. I had a good idea where most of the countries were because my dad used to spread out world maps in his study and show me. I'd have my tea at my nan's, a proper cooked meal, something like gammon or minced beef with potatoes and vegetables, which we always ate at the table. Come to think of it, I don't think she had a chip pan either.

Now and then I'd go, 'Nan, those girls have hit me again,' in the hope she might do something to help me. I could be wrong, but I got the feeling she didn't want to know.

Although she was kind, I don't think she fully understood what I was going through and what it was doing to me. All she'd say was I should talk to my teachers or tell my dad. Or stick up for myself.

End of subject.

# 2

In Percy Street, I spent hours in my bedroom by myself, writing poetry, making lists of places I wanted to visit: Argentina, Chile, Peru, Mexico, Brazil. I was always fascinated by South America. I don't remember ever feeling bored or lonely because there was always something I had to do. I'd play with my dolls, Sophia, Tiny Tears, Francesca and Tippy Tumbles, and make things for my teachers. At school I had a thing about washing my hands and spent ages in the cloakroom, which got me punished with the ruler on my hand or across the back of my legs. I spent hours covering my school books with wallpaper, lining them up in order in my satchel, writing my name over and over in the back of my exercise books until every inch of the page was covered. Everything had to be very particular, done the way I liked it. I had a thing about my pencils and stayed up late endlessly sharpening them, taking great care, concentrating, being

precise and neat and organized. It mattered that each pencil was the same length, that they all had identical points and looked *right*. Don't ask me why; I couldn't tell you. It just did. My dad would come up, tell me to go to sleep and put the light off. Once he'd gone I'd sneak out of bed, put the light back on, and get back to my pencils. There was always more to be done, one that wasn't perfect. My dad used to go mad. In the end the only way to stop me was to take the bulb out of my bedroom light.

While I was upstairs in a world of my own, sharpening pencils, downstairs the house was buzzing. When my dad had his friends round, you'd get a Jamaican car mechanic, a bass player from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, an exotic-looking woman in Ceylonese traditional dress, and some wild-haired spliff-smoking artist at the table. Mum would dish up an amazing stew, the whisky would come out, and they'd be drinking and talking and playing music for hours.

I was about seven when what I think of now as a time of complete madness began. Night after night I'd scream the house down and my father would come rushing into my bedroom. I'd fling myself at him and cling on, hysterical. He would shush me, settle me down and try and get me to go to sleep, only for the same thing to happen again. I'd be crying and shaking, utterly terrified. My parents had no idea what to do with me. As far as they were concerned, I was either attention-seeking or psychotic. I got very clingy with my dad and if Mum went near him I'd push her away. I started calling her Olwyn. I was prone to losing my temper if I didn't get my own way and would hold my breath and throw myself on

the floor or kick doors. Proper tantrums. They called in the doctor, who examined me and couldn't find anything wrong. The disturbed nights carried on and I was sent to an educational psychologist in the hope he would get to the bottom of whatever was making me so distressed. I knew exactly what the problem was, but no one believed me.

I had a ghost. Actually, I had two.

I'd be in my bedroom and a tall, elegant man in a top hat and cloak with a cane would appear at the foot of my bed. Some nights I could make out his face and bushy sideburns; others, all I saw was a gruesome skull. I'd start screaming and my dad would come running. Sometimes the figure disappeared; at other times I could still see him as my dad tried to comfort me. I'd be hysterical, screaming and shaking, pointing at the fella in the top hat, but no one else ever saw him. To me, he was clear and vivid and real. I think my parents thought I was going mad.

I went through a phase of turning on taps and leaving them running. Mum and Dad had these friends, Taff and Judith, who had a couple of kids, and we'd go and stay with them. I'd turn on every tap in the house. When my dad asked me why I was doing it, I said it was because of the woman in the rocking chair in my bedroom, that she'd told me to. My parents were tearing their hair out.

I told the educational psychologist about the man in the top hat and the woman in the rocking chair. He put it down to a vivid imagination, sparked by watching TV programmes like *Dixon of Dock Green*, *Z-Cars* and *Doctor Who*. The sessions I had with him didn't help. I kept on seeing the man in the top hat at the end of my bed and screaming my head off. It

drove my parents to distraction. It was worse for my mum because she had to be up earlier than my dad for work. After this had been going on a while, she couldn't take the sleepless nights and ended up having a breakdown that kept her off work for months. I knew she was feeling the strain and that, even without the ghost business, I was hard work, but at the same time I was only young and didn't fully understand how stressful it all must have been for her.

My nan, Josephine, must have died around this time. She was fifty-five. I don't remember anyone sitting me down and telling me she was dead, just my aunty Doreen and uncle Rob coming round one night when I was watching TV in the living room. The doors to my dad's study were open and they were all in there when my mum started to scream. I mean, *scream*. I could see Doreen holding on to her, then my dad came through and told me some story about Aunty Val burning her hand and Mum being upset. I don't know how I worked out my nan was dead, I just somehow knew. It was lung cancer that killed her, even though she'd never smoked.

I was eight when my brother, Simon Peter, was born. I had prayed for a boy and remember running into school to Mrs Morgan and going, 'My mum's had a boy!' To celebrate, I got a brand new blue trouser suit made of Crimplene, which was all the rage: flared pants and a little waistcoat, white socks and slingbacks. With my flares and frilly white blouse and long brown hair I felt like Peter Noone out of Herman's Hermits. I went off to the hospital dressed to the nines to meet the new baby.

I became completely obsessed with my brother. I took him

everywhere with me. The two of us were very close. Before he was born I'd been going to the Lesley Morris Dance School for tap, ballet and jazz classes. Mum used to take me and I loved it. We put on shows and the first time I went on stage was to do a tap number to 'Alexander's Ragtime Band'. I was in orange shorts, a bottle-green top and an orange cap. In the wings waiting to go on, I fainted, went out cold. I don't know what that was about. When I came round, I felt fine, so I went on and did my routine. I loved being on stage, performing, and I wanted to be a dancer. Then, not long after Simon was born, Mum said she was too busy with the baby and couldn't take me any more. I was gutted. It had never crossed my mind that having a little brother would change things and, at first, I resented him, but that didn't last long. In no time at all, I was besotted with him and begging my mother to let me take him out.

Just before Simon was born I stopped seeing the man in the top hat and cape in my bedroom. It ended overnight. Just like that, things went back to normal. I even stopped calling my mum Olwyn.

In the flat above us on Percy Street was a scene painter at the Liverpool Playhouse, Pete Sainty. Pete had wild black hair and a goatee beard and his place was littered with paint-spattered canvases. His girlfriend, Marilyn, had short red punky hair, a bit like Mia Farrow, and slouched around looking dead sexy. Pete and Marilyn loved to throw parties and when I was about eleven my dad decided I should be allowed to go to one. Mum was dead against it but Dad was adamant, determined I'd have all kinds of experiences. I

borrowed a mohair sweater from Marilyn and wore a pair of Wranglers I'd taken in to make them proper skinny. Upstairs, Jimi Hendrix belted out of the stereo and there were all these people with long hair smoking big spliffs. Bowls, some with coleslaw and others with some kind of strange beetroot stew, were dotted around. The actor Don Warrington, who played Philip in the TV series *Rising Damp*, was there. Barry Andrews, an actor who was on TV in an advert for salmon paste, also turned up. His was a very familiar face in Liverpool and in our house. Every time he popped up with a fish in the ad, my dad would go, 'There's Barry again!' I was fascinated and impressed and hung about in the background watching all these interesting people.

My parents spoiled me rotten, Dad giving me money, Mum taking me shopping. She was always treating me, getting me new outfits. We'd come home loaded down with bags and it would all be stuff for me: a new coat, a dress that went with it, another dress that didn't, shoes, hotpants, boots. My mother always looked good. Every day of her life she wore heels. Even her slippers had a small heel. When I was little, she wore halter-neck maxi dresses and huge platform shoes. She had a good eye for fashion and knew how to take something ordinary and make it work. When she was a kid and my nan didn't have the money for swimming costumes for her and her big sister, Doreen, Mum decided to cut the sleeves off their Fair Isle sweaters and turn them into bathing suits. They looked the part – until they got into the baths and the wool stretched. Still, it tells you my mum knew how to take a garment and do something clever with it. She'd get little

bottles of shoe dye from Timpson's and I'd watch, fascinated, as she spread newspaper on the floor and the bright pink platform heels she was bored with became an eye-catching shade of purple. A plain dress would get the tie-dye treatment. She had a box full of scarves and she'd pull them out and find something that gave an outfit a totally new slant. All the time, she changed her hair. I remember it blonde, dark, red, cropped, wavy, permed. She wore wigs too and had lots of different styles on polystyrene heads in her bedroom.

My dad was always in a suit, navy usually, and a shirt and tie. Even on holiday he'd be in long pants and a white shirt open at the neck. That was about as casual as he got. The only time he succumbed to a pair of shorts was at the hotel swimming pool. Never in a million years would you have persuaded him to wear a pair of jeans or, God in heaven, trainers. No, no, *no*.

Appearances were important to my parents. A lot of the time they were tanned from being on holiday somewhere hot. At home, once the tan faded, they had one of those little sunlamps that were popular for a while, for their faces. Eventually, my dad bought a proper sun bed, the kind they had in salons where you lay down and got brown everywhere. Even when I was small I knew my parents were well-dressed, good-looking people.

I didn't look like either of them.

From about the age of seven I felt different, that no one really understood me. Years later, when I was having therapy, I started to think about what I was like as a little girl – obsessively sharpening my pencils, having night terrors, seeing ghostly figures – and it made me think about how intense I

was. Mad Tina. At school, I was desperate to fit in and never did because my home life set me apart, and, at home, half the time I drove my parents crazy. Looking back, I wonder if even as a child I was depressed and my behaviour then was a sign of things to come.