

(I wrote this in about 2023)

This isn't really my story, I borrowed it from my Granny.

My Granny's name is Shirely Ann(e) Hopkinson. I asked her recently if she spelt Anne with an 'e' or without, and she said both.

Granny has had an incredible life, full of stories, people and places. She's a wonderful person and I'm profoundly grateful that our time on earth has overlapped for as long as it has.

I had been living in Nice for a good year or so before she told me that she'd been to Cannes. She went fairly soon after the Second World War ended, in about 1948, so she must have been about 17 years old.

She and her parents, my great-grandparents, put on their best woollen travelling suits, packed up a little case each, caught the train from their home in Guiseley in Yorkshire down to London and from London they went even further south and caught a ferry across the Channel to France.

From the north of France, they caught more trains, meandering further and further south, getting off at small rural stations to consult large train timetables written in a foreign language, with the single-minded mission of going to Cannes.

I can hardly conceive of it now. Travel now is so easy, so straightforward, so convenient. It's a known quantity. But this journey was planned out by looking at maps, cross-referencing train schedules, writing letters to hotels to inquire about the possibility of reserving some rooms. To me, it has the madness and genius of ants building a nest. They must have some sort of plan or vision, but how do they do it? How do they know that it'll all work out?

The journey took almost a week and when they arrived in Cannes, they found it almost flattened from the ravages of the war. But still, there was the port, the beach, the sea and the hotel. It must have felt like landing on the moon.

I've seen some photos from this holiday. My great-grandmother had misplaced her case on the way and had to spend nearly the whole trip in her thick woollen clothing. Granny met two lovely young Scandinavian men on the beach who were friendly with her, and very friendly with each other. It's nice to think that two young male friends could go on a holiday together to tan their waxed chests and sun their tight bathing suited bodies lying side-by-side on a beach in the south of France without it raising an eyebrow.

As their holiday came to a close, my great-grandfather counted out their remaining funds. In those days, there was a limit to how much money you could take out of the country and they were right up against it. But Fred went through their coins and calculated that they could afford one macaron from a Cannes boulangerie and share it between the three of them.

I sometimes think of Granny aged 17 standing in the Port of Cannes, eating her third of a macaron. The devastation of war and tragedies both global and personal behind her, and the sea and her future stretching out ahead of her.

I rarely go to Cannes nowadays (people from Nice don't like it there, you see), but it's only about 30 km down the road from here. It seems strange to me that I've settled so close to the place where she had her tertiary treat, but then time does that to you. It turns and turns and turns, until you end up back where you started.

Today I'm lucky enough that I can afford to buy a macaron just for me, and sometimes I do. I buy a macaron from a bakery and walk down by the sea, on my way to meet someone or just for the pleasure of walking, and I feel like the richest person in the world. The future ahead of me, and a whole macaron in my hand.