Learning to talk about death

Grave goods as a tool for a tricky topic

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This presentation was written by Dr Jennifer Riley of the University of Aberdeen. It draws on her research project ‘Baggage for the Beyond,’ which is funded by the Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship scheme. It was originally delivered to staff at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary as part of Demystfying Death Week 2025

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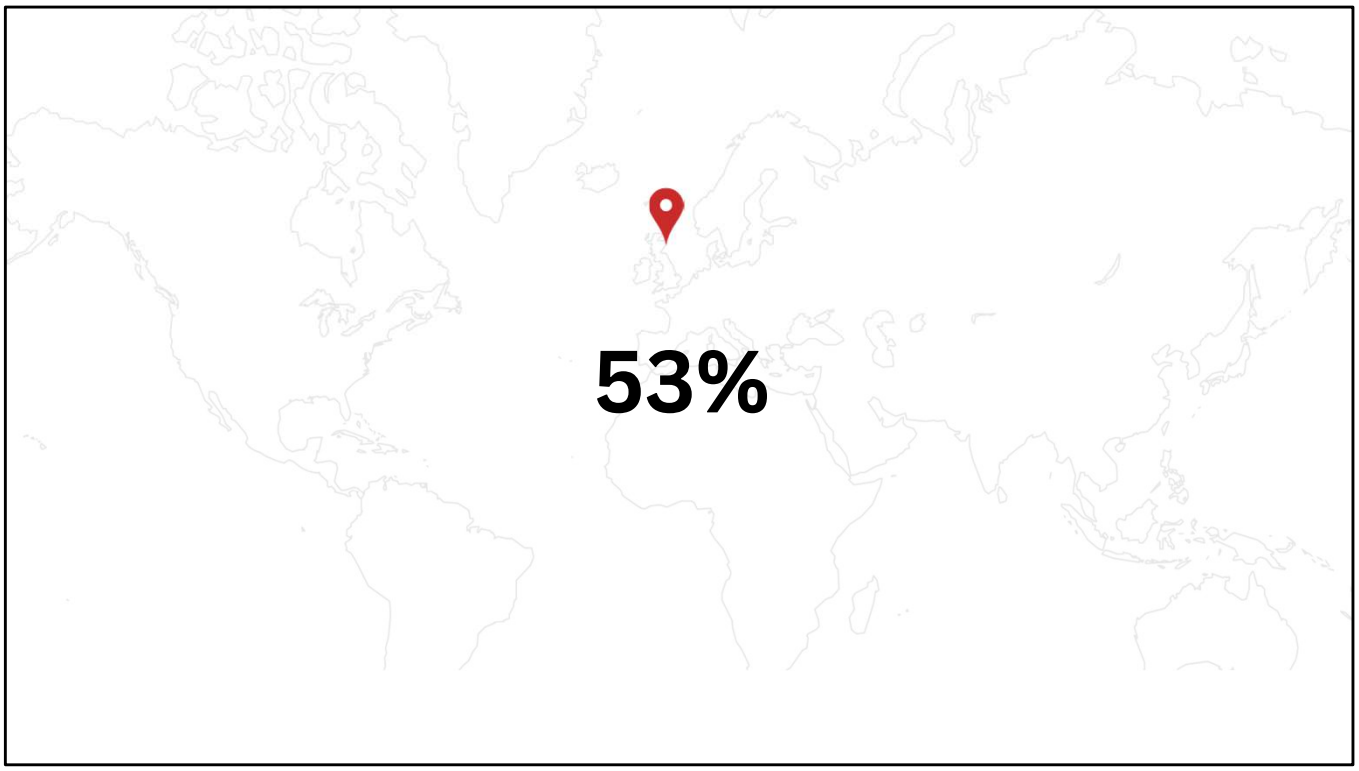
Grave goods are **The things people put in other people's coffins or graves when they die, knowing that they will almost certainly never get them back**

While closely associated with the Ancient world and the funerary practice of, for example, the ancient Egyptians or the Vikings, they are also important in the UK today.



A 2025 YouGov survey, commissioned as part of the study, suggested that 53% of funerals feature some sort of grave good - at a conservative estimate. That equates to 350,000 UK funerals a year in which some sort of grave good has some sort of role.

1. **Flowers – 35%**
2. **Clothing – 19%**
3. **Photographs – 19%**
4. **Letters, cards and notes- 16%**
5. **Jewellery, Watches and Other accessories – 9%**

Those objects take all shapes and sizes, but the same survey indicated these were the most common.

Grave goods are alive and well around us today – we just don't really talk about them. In fact, it's often said that in in the UK we do what we can to avoid talking about death altogether.

This research study is designed to help change that – as is this presentation.

This presentation is designed to take you on a journey – a journey that mimics the one I have been on myself as a death researcher. Because you can't research death without it making an impression. In my case, that journey has taken me to a point a lot of people never reach – a point where I am *pretty* comfortable thinking and talking about death. Which doesn't mean those subjects hold no fear or emotion for me – quite the opposite: I know precisely how serious they are. But it does mean I have reached a point where I can have important conversations about death and dying that many people find very difficult.

At every stop of the journey, we're going to use grave goods as a focus. Because sometimes it's easier to focus on objects, and specific items and decisions, than it is to digest or face up to the whole, huge, abstract subject of death and dying. In that sense, grave goods work as thinking tools.

My intention is that each stop will make us slightly readier for the next, bringing us slightly closer to the deaths which frighten us most, and which we're least comfortable discussing.

The activities are deliberately fun and light-hearted. Something important I have learned on my journey as a death researcher is that death can co-exist alongside humour; alongside laughter; alongside joy; and alongside a little bit of silliness. In fact, I think death *needs* those things – they help us face it.

STEP 1

Step one takes us to Ancient Egypt – the school topic that first piqued my interest in studying death, dying and ritual!

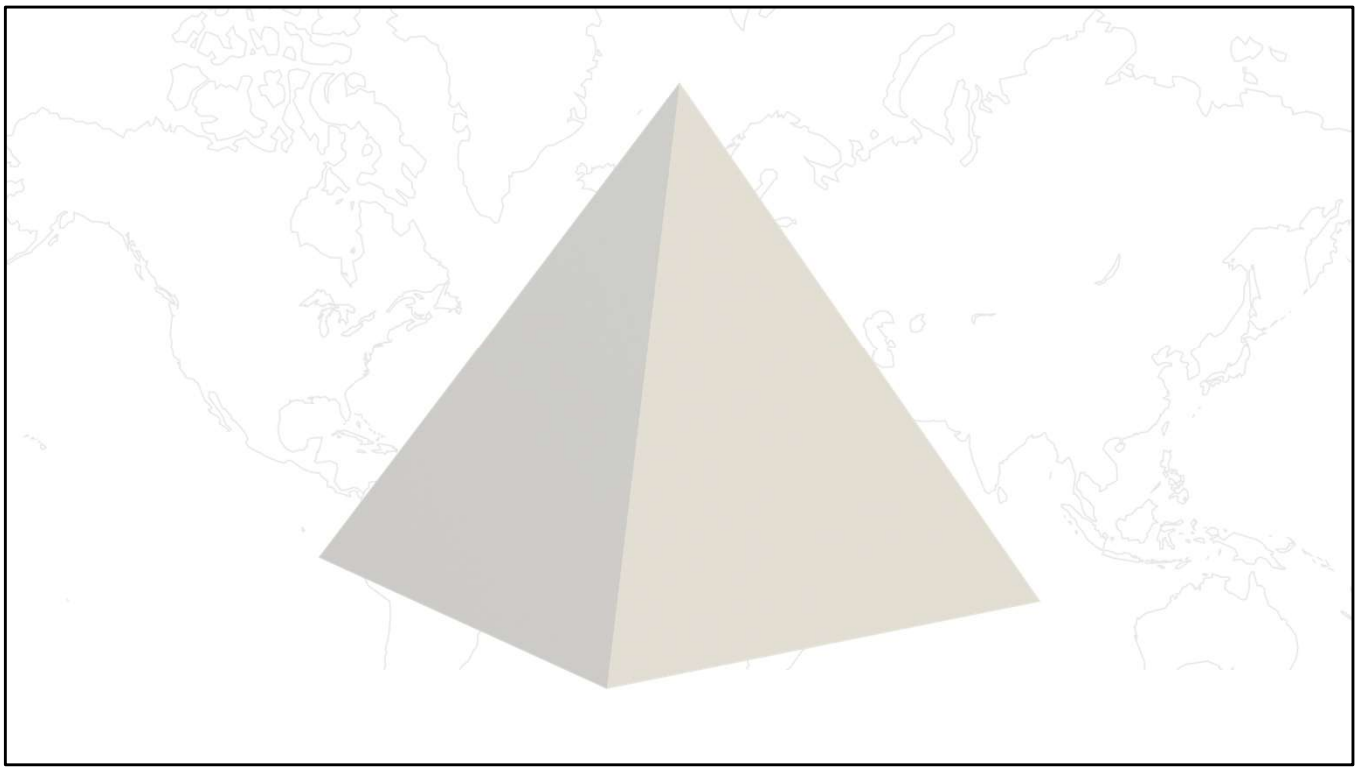
I fell in love with Ancient Egyptian death – mummies, tombs, canopic jars, the Book of the Dead, and the afterlife. The Egyptians really knew how to make a big material fuss over dying.

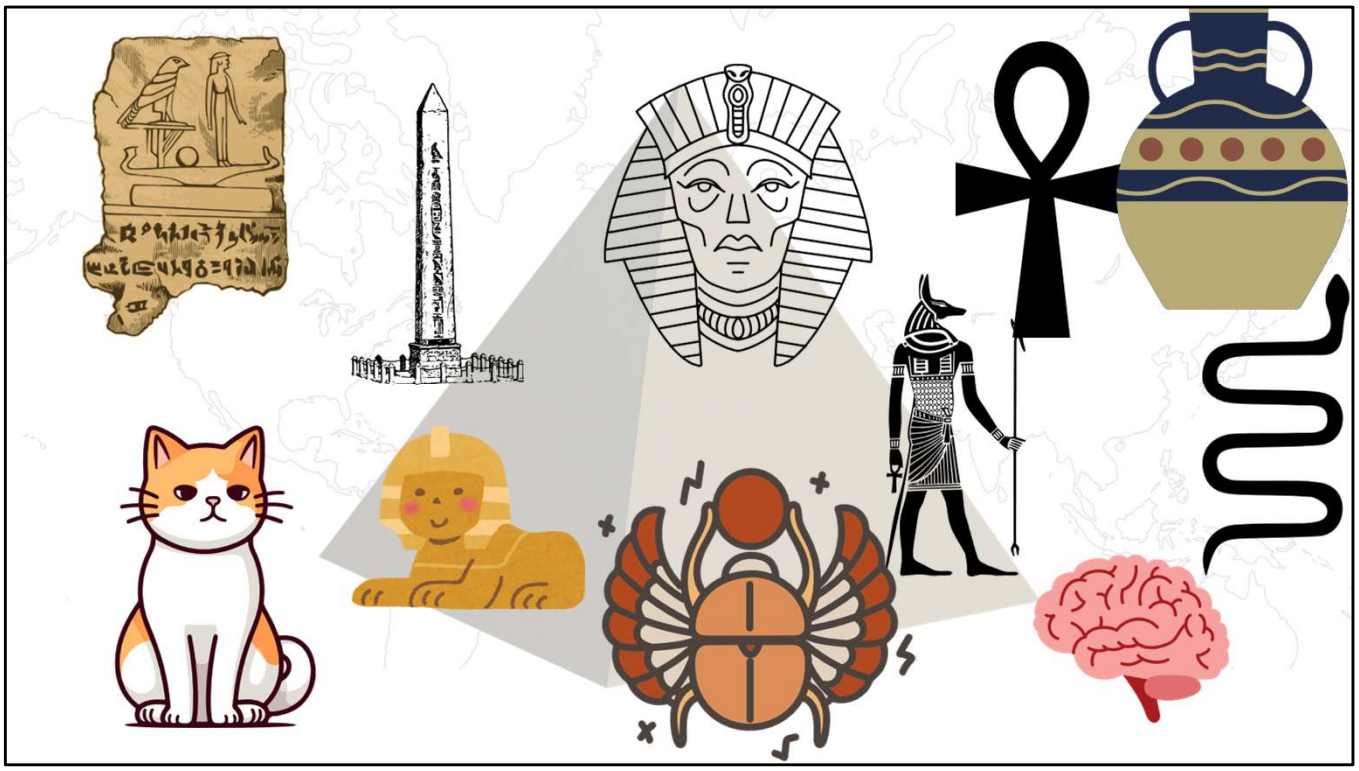
Without realising it, exploring the Egyptians was my first small step towards a career studying death and dying. And it didn't feel scary – it felt fascinating. Which is why the first step on today's journey is the pyramids.

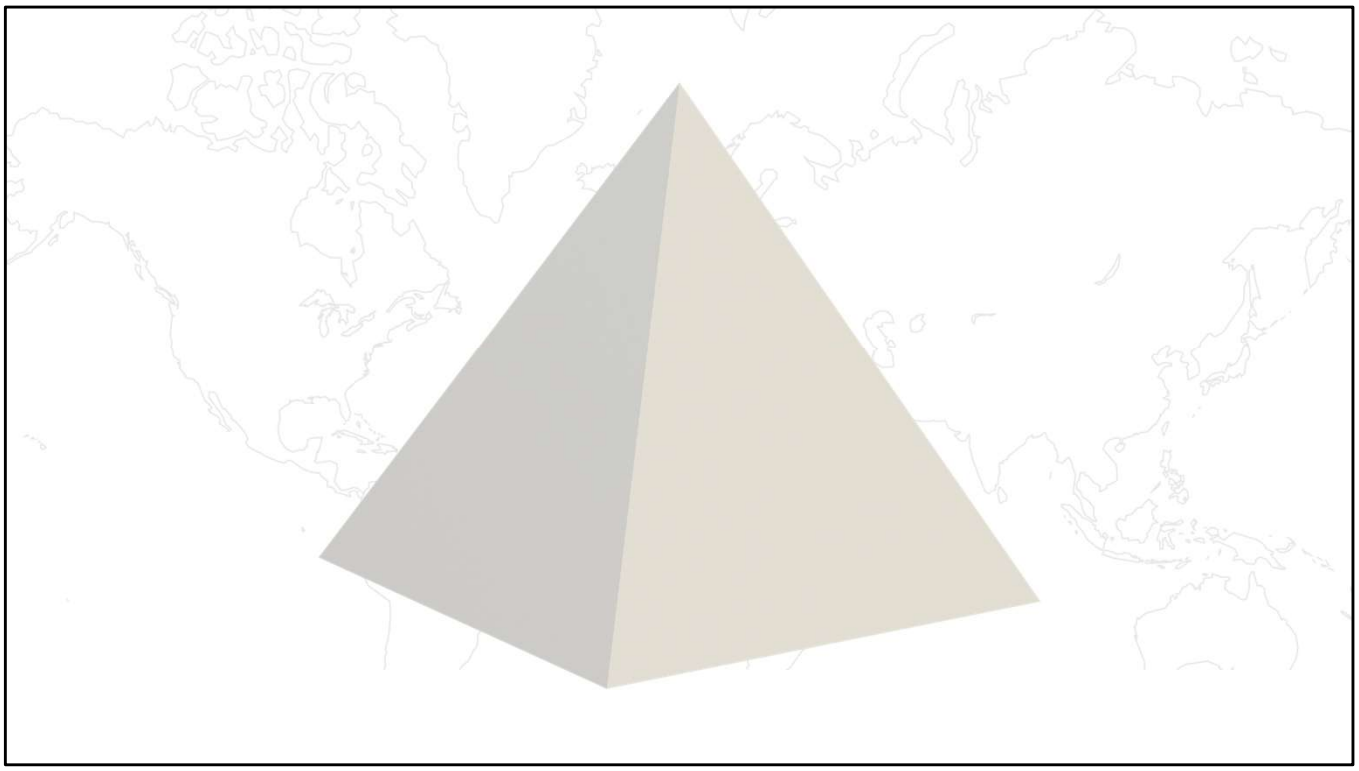
To help us think about the grave goods the ancient Egyptians left with their dead to prepare them for the afterlife, this version of 'Kim's game' uses ancient Egyptian grave goods (I asked my husband to find some sort of Egyptian pun for the title: you

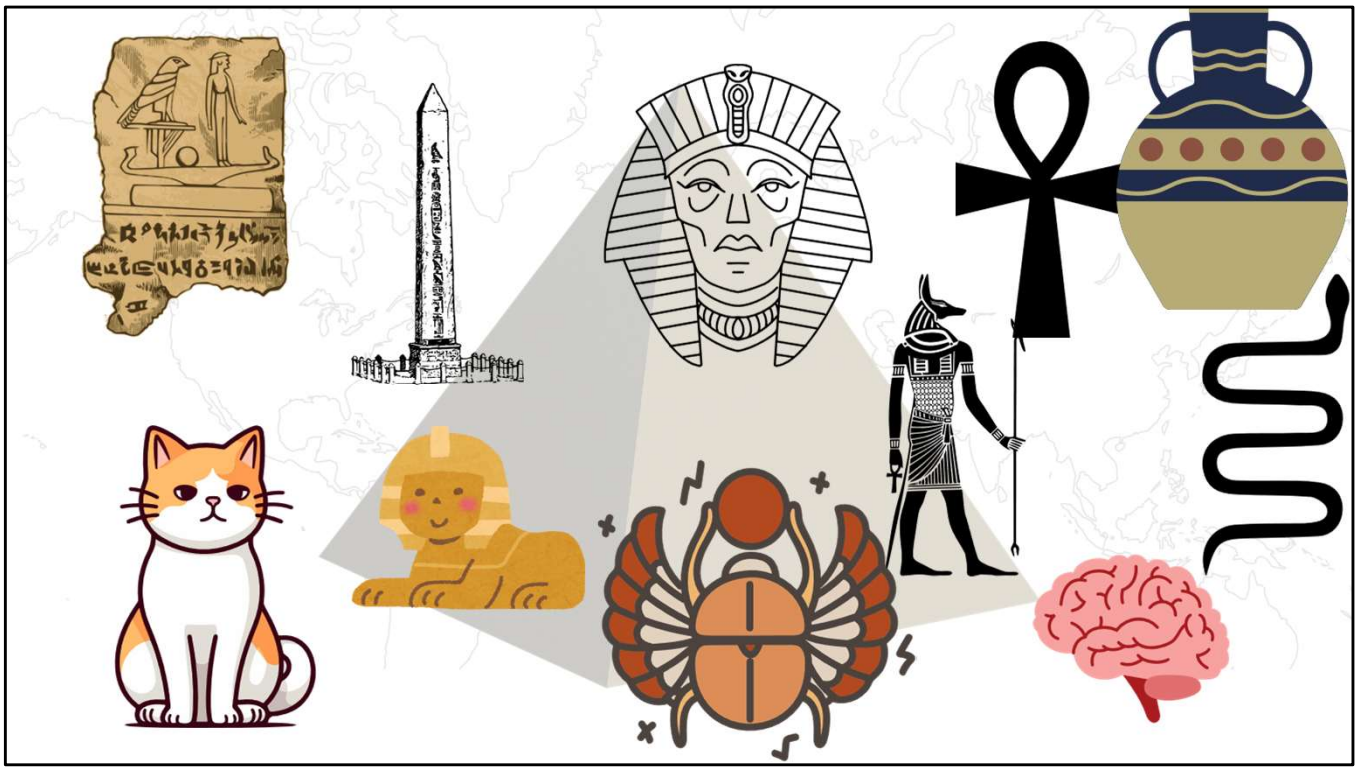
may call it *Rememhotep.)*

The rules are very simple. In a second, I'm going to change the slide to show 11 examples of grave goods that have been found in Ancient Egyptian burials. You can look at them for 30 seconds – and then I'll change the slide and take them away. You've then got 1 minute to try and remember all 11.



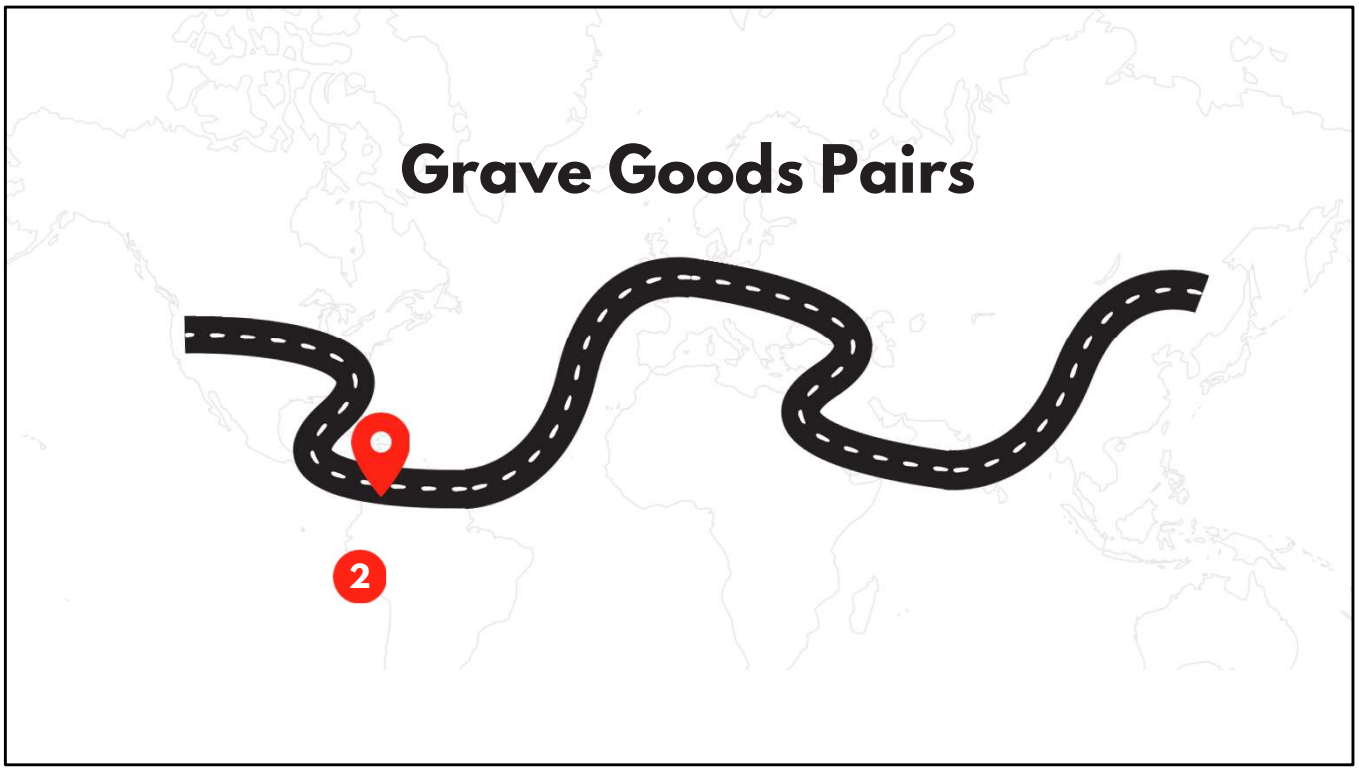




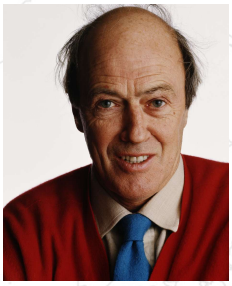


Hopefully *Rememhotep* wasn't too scary, but t got you thinking about the whole business of burying things with the dead: what that looks like, and why people might do it – or not.

It did so in a quite remote way – many of these specific objects are unfamiliar to us, and the Ancient Egyptians lived a very long time ago. There's quite a buffer of distance.



So, as we take our second step, let's close some of that distance, and look at more modern grave goods.

Whale tooth	Bar of chocolate	Love letter	Bible	Bottle of Jack Daniels

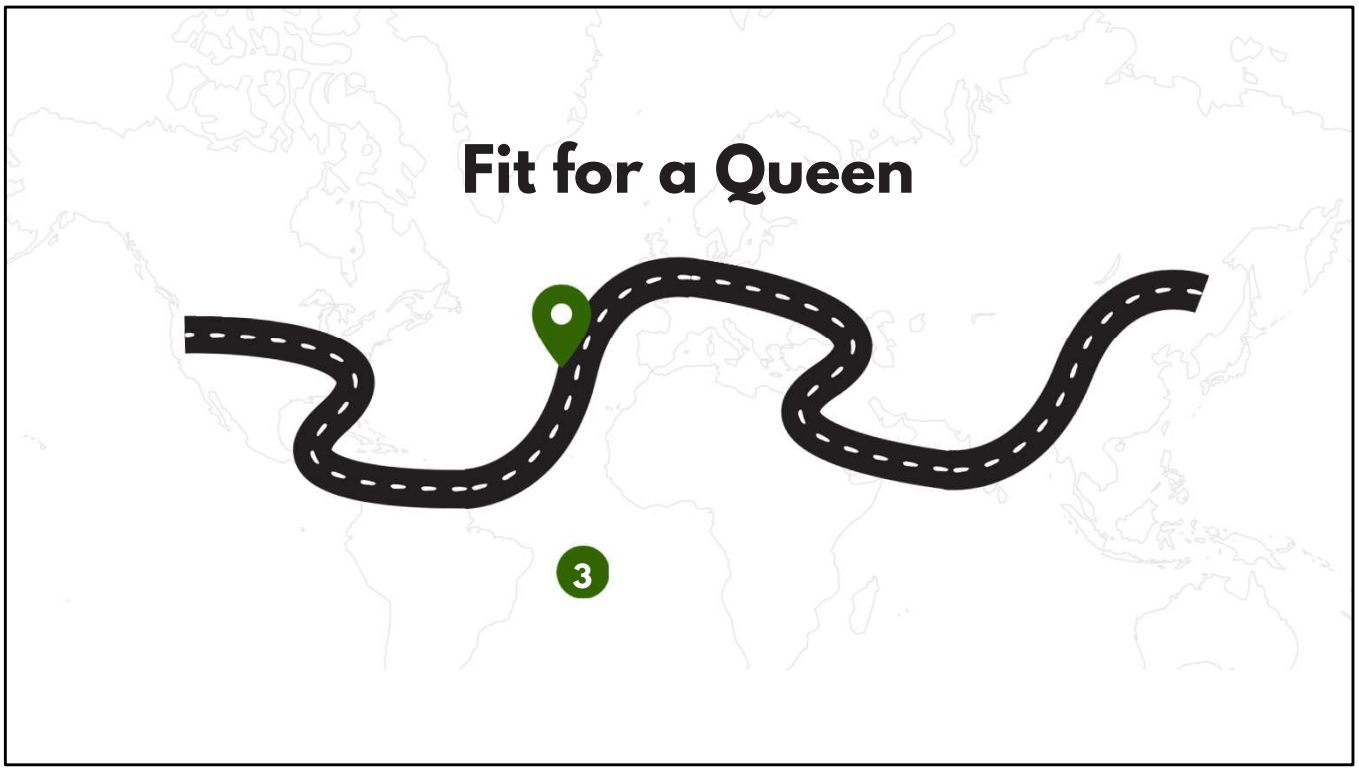
On the screen are five 20th century celebrities – Elizabeth Taylor; JFK; Roald Dahl; Frank Sinatra; and Bob Marley. Below them are five grave goods.

The task is simple: pair up the grave goods with the celebrity whose funeral featured them.

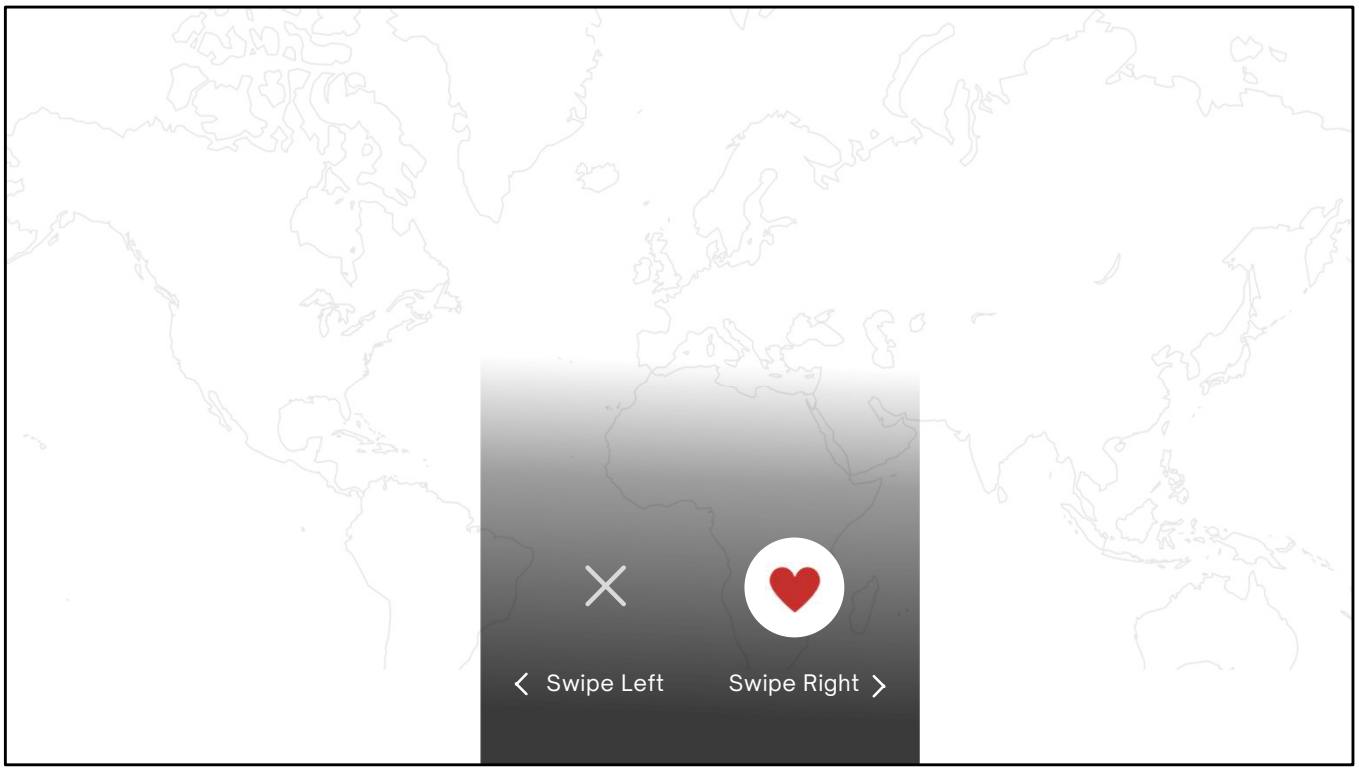
These are the answers. A love letter for Elizabeth; a whale tooth for JFK; chocolate for Roald Dahl; a bottle of Jack Daniels for Frank Sinatra, and a Bible for Bob Marley.

How are you feeling now, now that gap has closed a little? These people are still strangers to us, in most senses. But they feel a little closer – we have photographs of them, and they lived well within living memory. These objects – maybe excepting the whale tooth – are also all familiar. I've encountered all of them in real, recent examples as part of my research into grave goods.

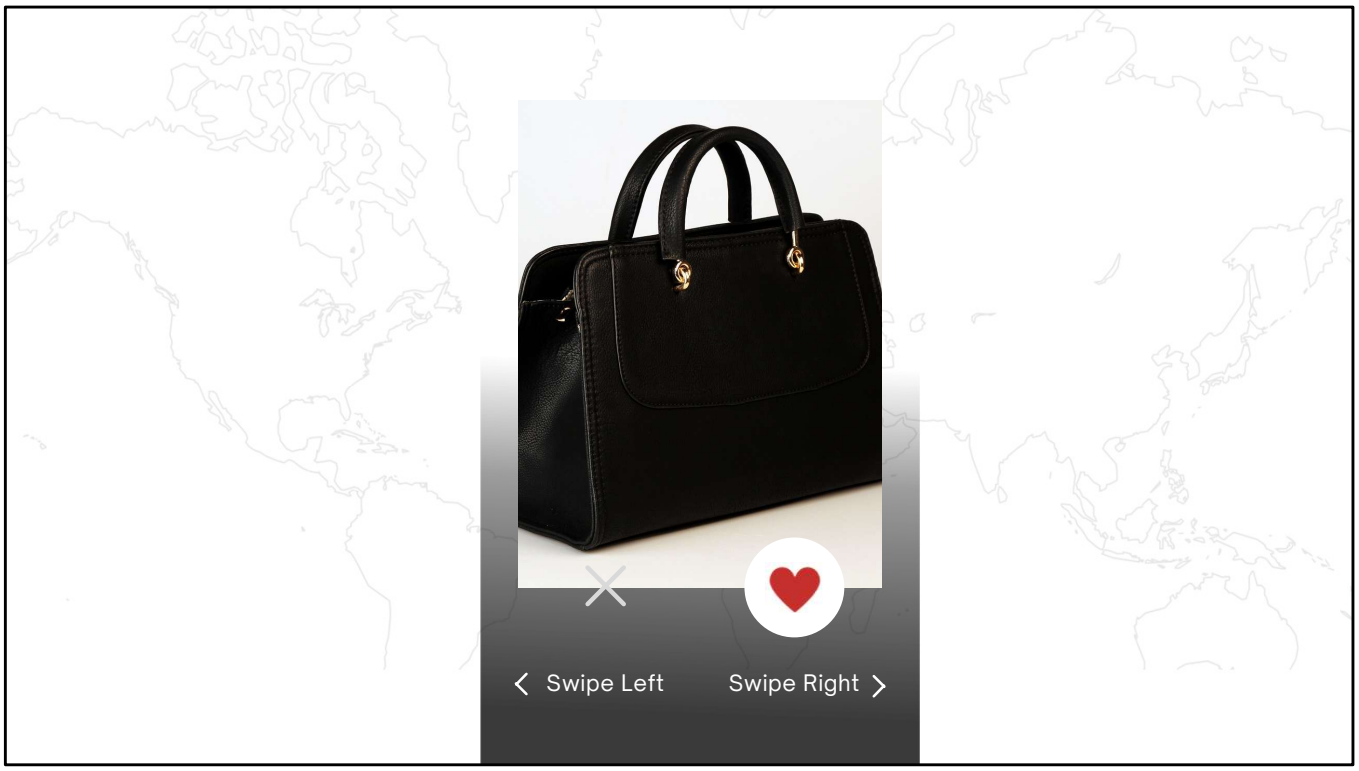
Ther act of matching grave goods to individuals helps us to explore how different grave goods 'fit' with different people . It makes a kind of *sense* that Roald Dahl would have a chocolate bar; or Elizabeth Taylor a love letter. These objects capture something of these celebrities' identities, legacies, their personalities and their relationships. That is what grave goods do. They're used to make someone's final goodbye unique – to capture the unique impact that person had. Which is something that very many people in contemporary Britain consider crucial when planning someone's funeral or memorial.



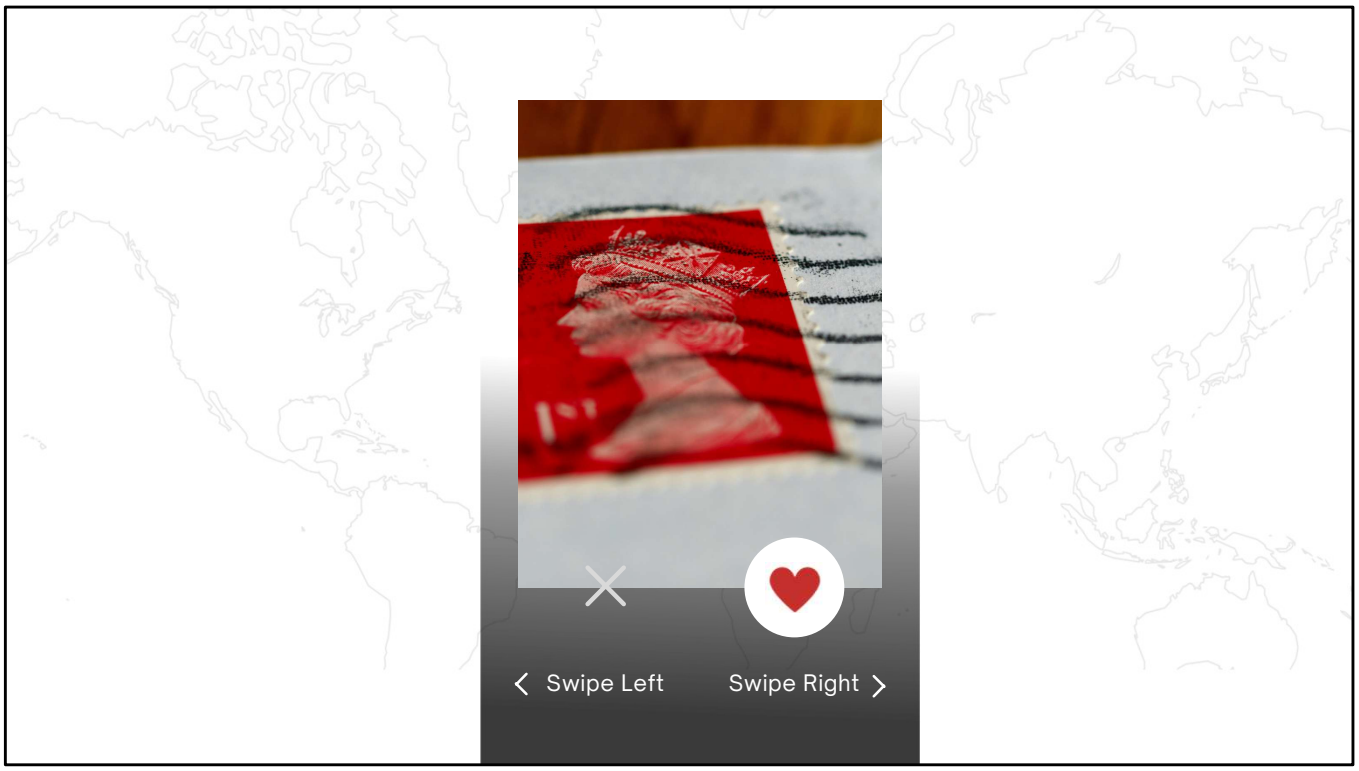
For our next step, we're sticking with famous people, but more recently – 2022 – looking at a death I suspect no one could have missed: Queen Elizabeth II. You might be thinking that there is surely nothing more we can learn about the Queen's death – everything about her and her funeral was broadcast widely and in minute detail. But for me, at least, there was one glaring omission: what was *inside* the Queen's coffin.? I suspect that if I asked, I'd be put on a list somewhere. But we can think about what might have made fitting grave good for QEII.



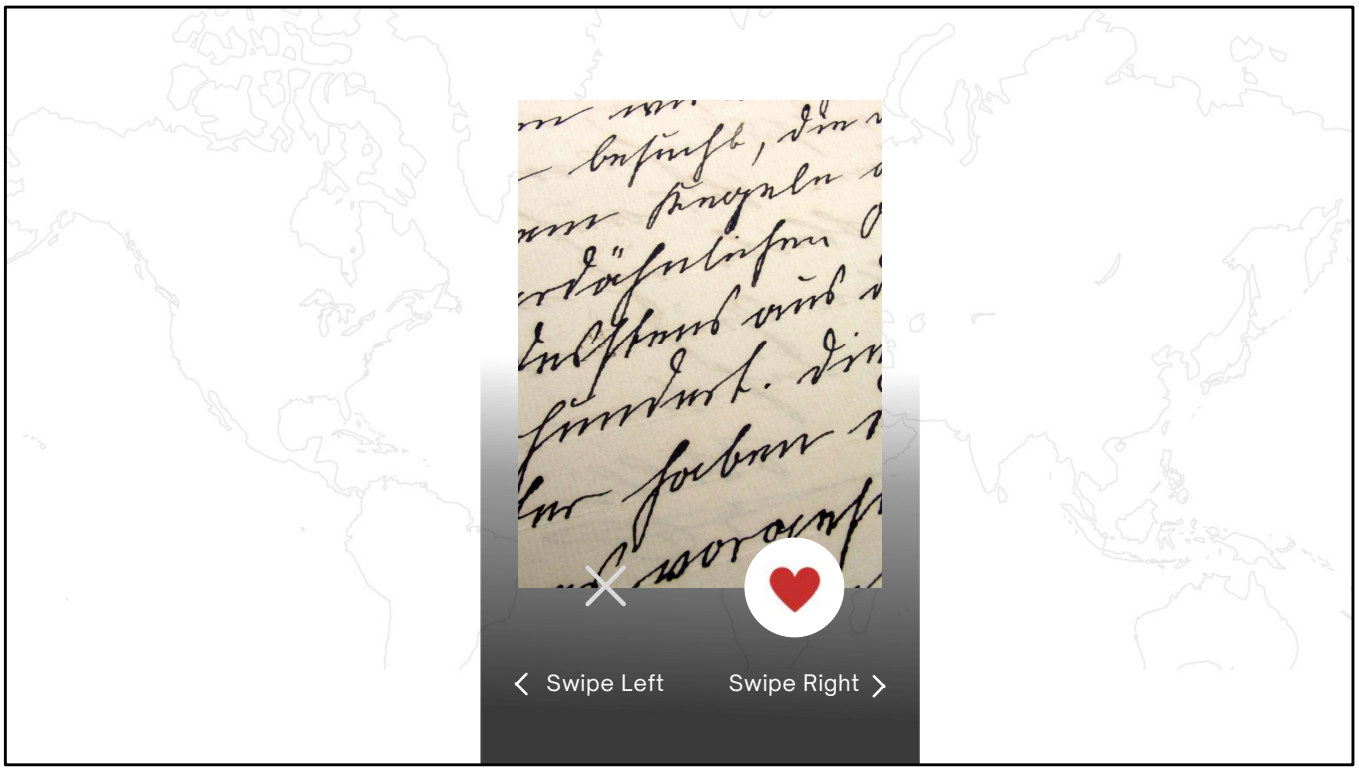
But there's a chance I'm going to end up on a list for what I'm about to do anyway, so perhaps that will sway things. Introducing: Queen's Coffin Tinder! This game is simple. I've picked out some potential queenly grave goods, and for each one, you get to decide whether you would swipe left for no or swipe right for yes.



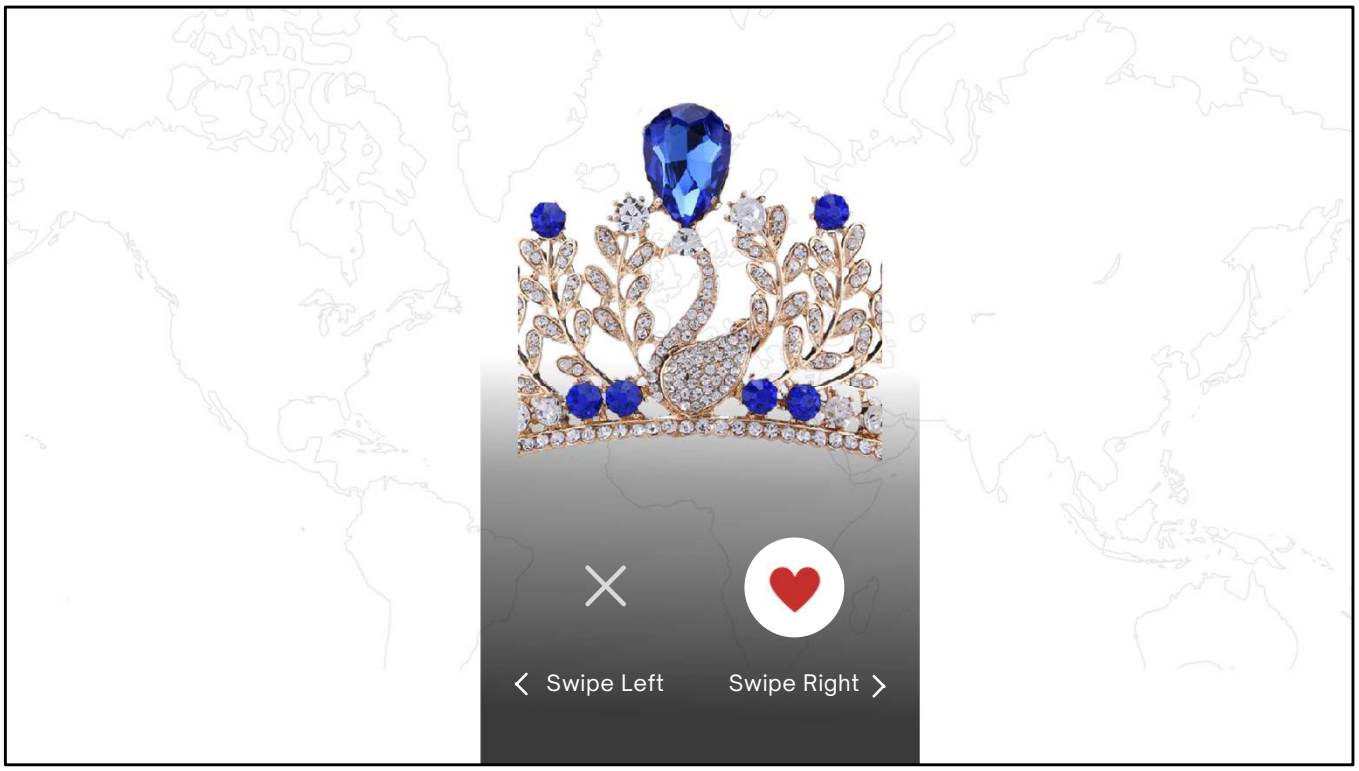
First – the Queen famously always carried a black leather handbag on public engagements. So – what about popping one in her coffin with her?



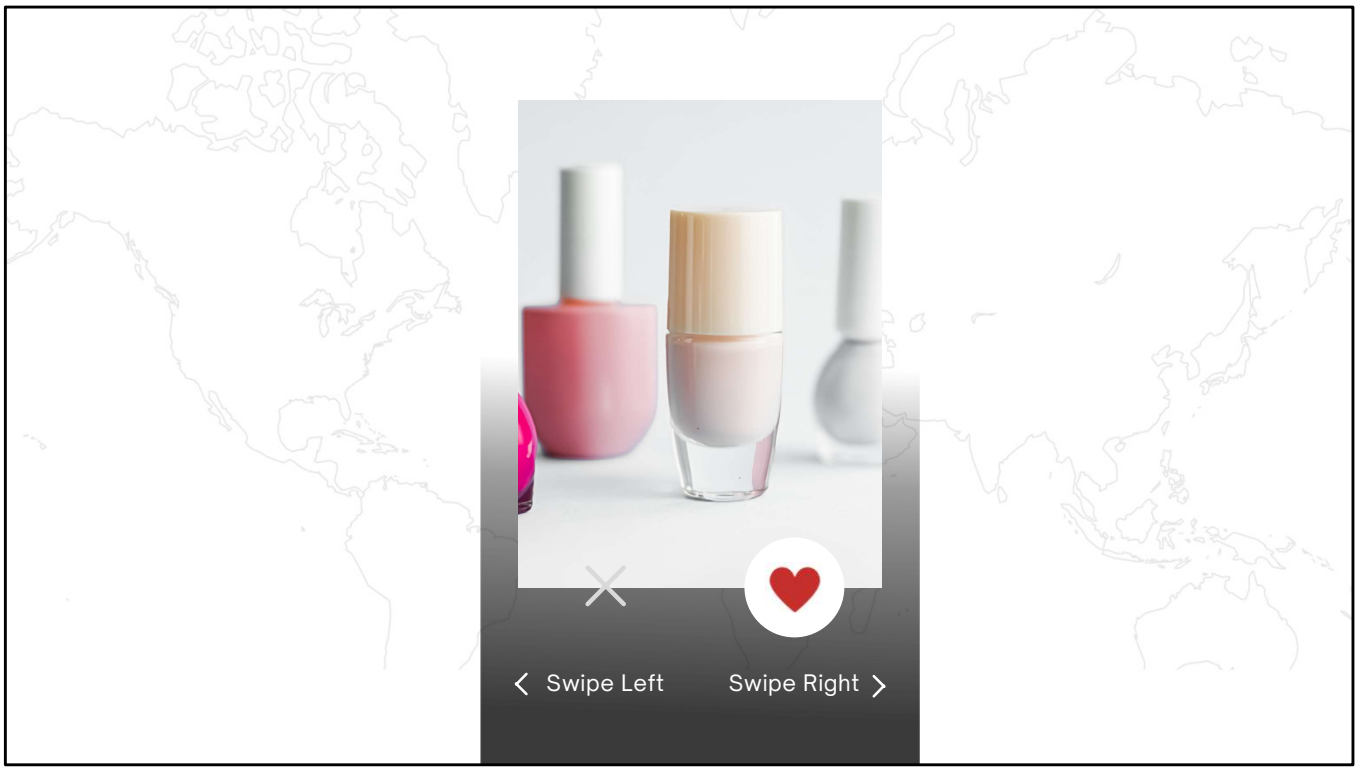
Second – A stamp. It's not huge, and it seems fitting – it literally has her all over it. A marker, surely, of her long reign and her ubiquitous presence and profile? Would a stamp make a fitting royal grave good?



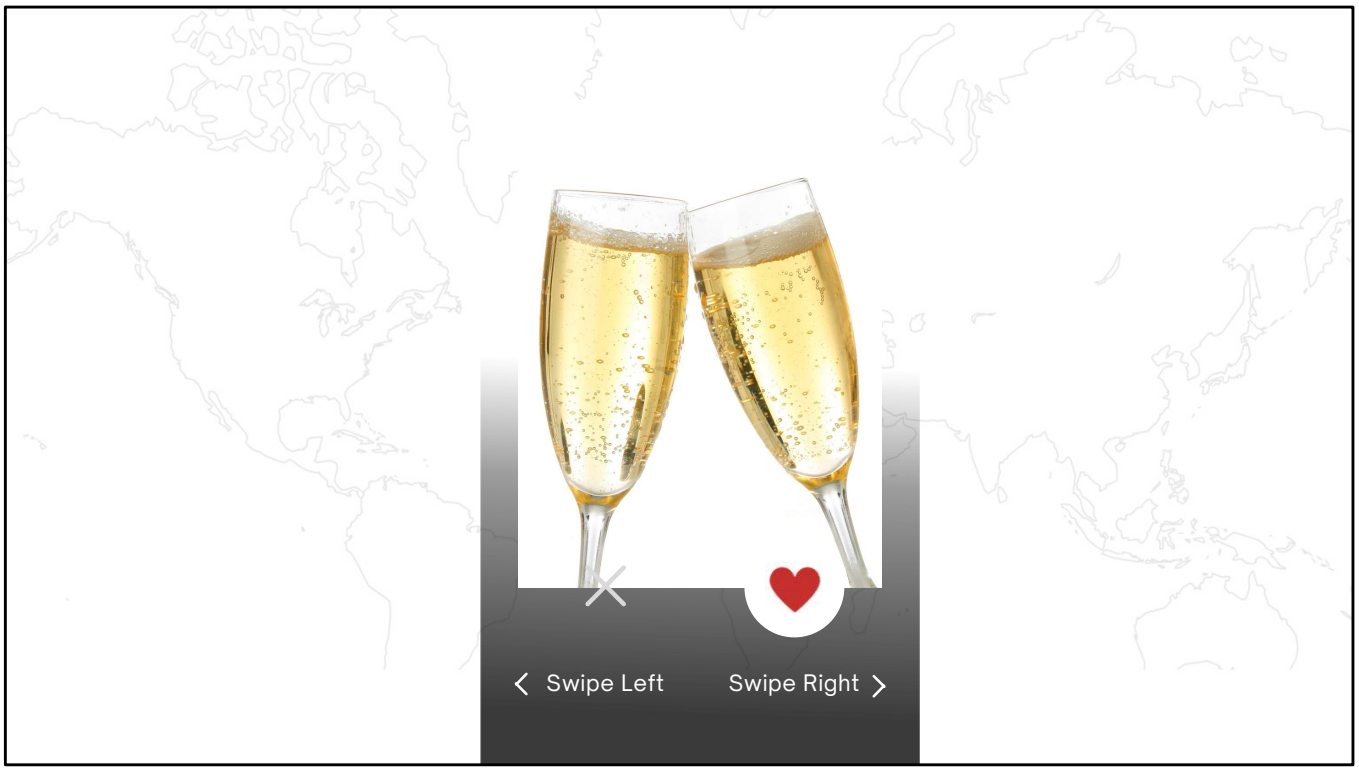
Third – Some letters. As mentioned, writing to the dead is peculiarly popular. Some people write long letters – others scribble last-minute heartfelt notes and postcards. Few of them are read, which I think is a bit magical. It's a way of expressing love, perhaps unspoken truths, or having out a conversation that you never quite felt able to have in life. The Queen will have written thousands of letters during her lifetime – do you think any of her nearest and dearest took the chance to write one to her, and pop it in her coffin?



Fourth – Royal jewellery. Surely something so valuable, so historic, shouldn't be squirreled away in a grave? But a great many people are buried or cremated with jewellery – sometimes very valuable jewellery indeed, financially and sentimentally. And who's to say there wasn't something small that the Queen particularly treasured, that might still be about her person in the crypt of St George's?



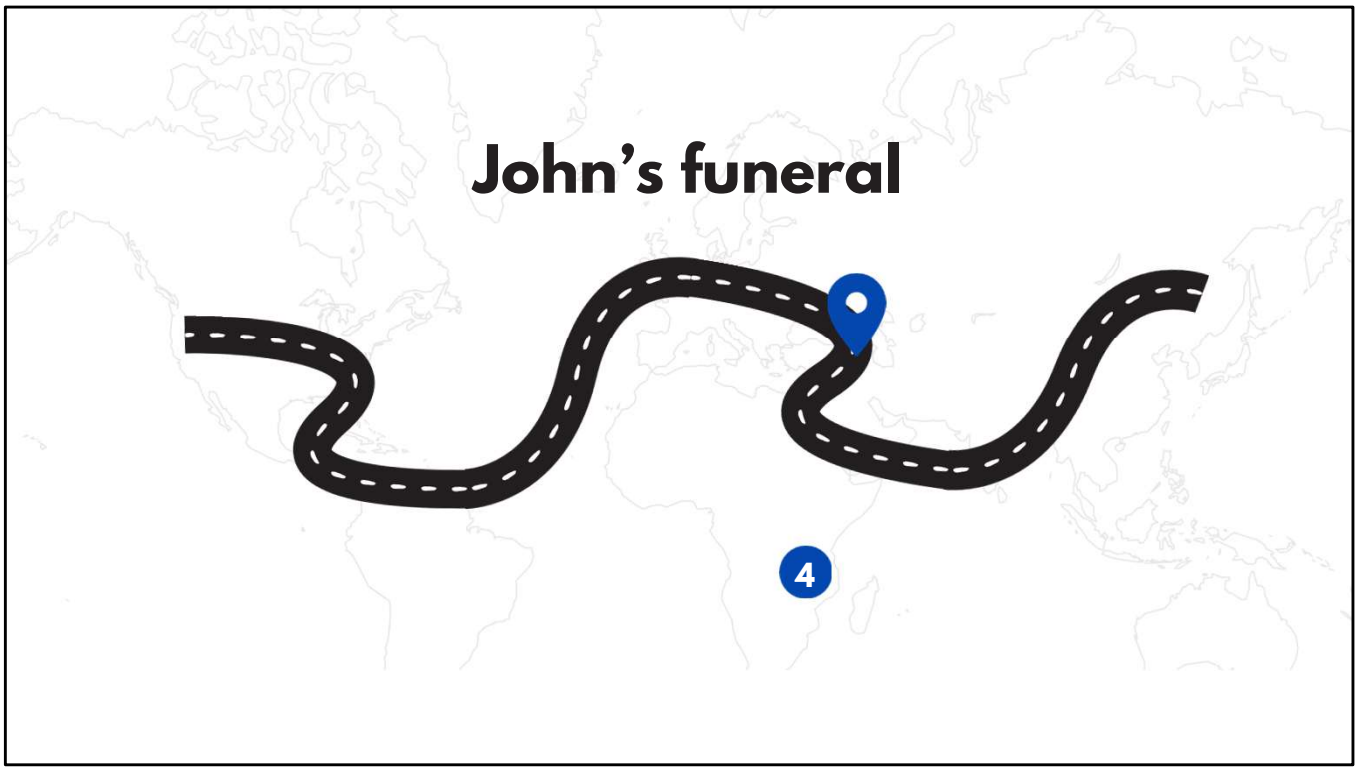
Fifth – nail varnish. Supposedly the Queen was rarely seen without her specific shade of Essie nude nail varnish. Would you carry that on in death? Or does it all seem a little pointless, making sure the dead have neatly manicured nails?



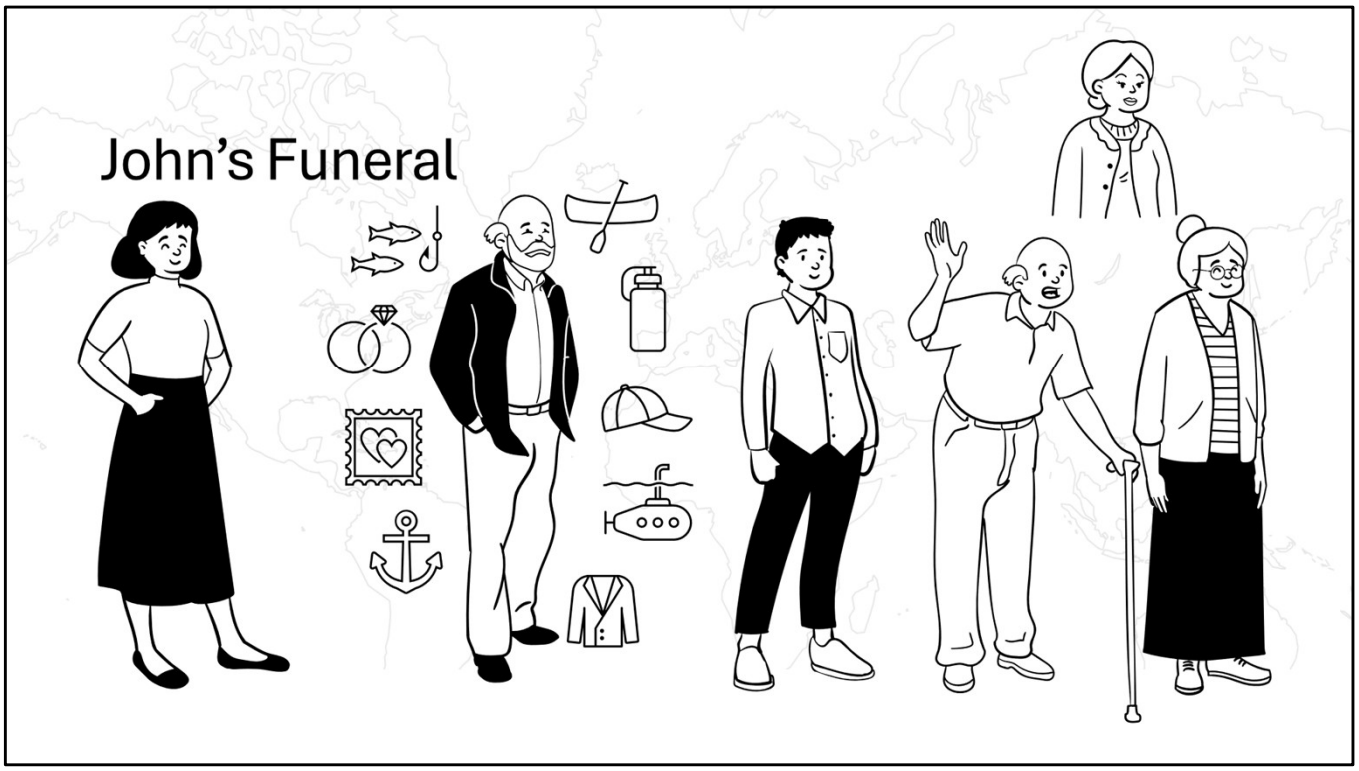
Sixthly and finally – Champagne. Rumour has it the Queen drank a small glass every day. And plenty of people say that they might like to have food and drink – especially favourite foods and drinks – with them. Perhaps a bottle of champagne to keep Liz company?

I don't know which – if any – of these objects you think are fit for a queen. But I do know that, with this step on the grave goods journey, we've not only closed the gap of time and familiarity further still – we've also introduced some gentle decision-making. You're starting to think about the reality of burying or not burying specific items; you're weighing up the objects and their meanings and their significances, as well as their functions, value, and whether they should belong to the living.

You might also be thinking about the point of them – the point of any of this. You wouldn't be alone – in the YouGov grave goods survey plenty of people (mostly politely) expressed their incredulity, to the tune of 'what on earth is the point, they're dead'. And I don't begrudge them that, because there is a level on which grave goods are a bit bonkers. That might be especially true if you're part of the great UK majority that doesn't believe in an afterlife – or, at least, not in any afterlife where you're able to take anything with you. And yet – so very many people in the UK today do still seem to find it meaningful.



Including people like Jane and John – to whom I am now briefly going to introduce you for the next stop on this grave goods journey.



Jane recently lost her Dad, John, quite unexpectedly at age 71. In life, John loved fishing, and could reliably be found wearing an anorak, snuggled in a blanket and a disreputable hat at the side of the lake, drinking tea from a Thermos flask. He used to take Jane sometimes, as well as her son Fred. Jane wasn't much of a fisher, but she loved spending time with her Dad and her son.

Before he retired, John was a military man, a submariner in the navy who took on primarily on-shore duties when Jane started secondary school, because it was less disruptive for family life if they weren't always moving around, which Jane and her Mum both found quite hard. But John loved the navy, and kept his uniform in pristine condition, always bringing it out on Remembrance day and sometimes for family weddings.

John's wife, Debbie, also died quite young – a few years ago, leaving John a widow after almost forty years of marriage. He missed her, and kept photographs of her on his bedside table and in his wallet.

John was regularly in touch with his younger sister Fiona and his older brother James. James, like John, was in the military – part of a proud tradition going back generations of belonging to the armed forces.

Neither John nor Jane particularly belong or belonged to a religion, and they've never really thought or talked about what they think happens when someone dies. But Fiona is a Spiritualist. Because she's a spiritualist, she believes that for some time after death, the dead don't pass on, but hover between worlds, and can therefore see their funerals, and the way their body is prepared beforehand.

As his only child, Jane is left making decisions about her Dad's funeral. John didn't leave much indication of what he wanted to happen with his body or at his funeral. Jane decides her Dad should have a natural burial – she likes that it's an environmentally-conscious choice, and there's a natural burial site not far from John's house where they have a small lake. Fitting, since she has such fond memories of spending time on the lakeside with her Dad. It'll be a nice place to visit sometimes.

But that's not the only decision she has to make. The funeral director encourages her to think about what she might like her dad to wear, and whether there's anything else she would like to put in the coffin. The funeral director says it might be helpful to discuss it with other members of the family, such as Fiona and James.

My question is this: If you were Jane, what 'grave goods' might you pick: what might you choose for him to wear? And what might make you hesitate?

These bullet points are some of the things I think might be going through Jane's head.

- Honouring John's interests and identity
    - But – which interests? Whose version of his identity?
- Keeping people happy
- What would John have wanted?
- What might harm the environment?
- Implications of not ever being able to retrieve the objects buried – what if I want them back?
- What is the financial value of these clothes/items?
- She has to live with the mental image of how her Dad was dressed – what will bring her most comfort?
- "Does it matter"? "What's the point?"

- Would it be better to pass on any of these grave goods to John's family – his brother, daughter or grandson?

John isn't someone you know – in fact, he isn't real. But he's probably got some sort of familiarity. Perhaps he's the sort of person you might well know – with passions and relationships and interests and preferences. You can make decisions about what might or might not be fitting for his grave goods, and insodoing you're practising thinking about how to relate specific grave goods to specific people, and working from a blank slate to plan a personal funeral – ideally, one which doesn't do undue harm to the environment.

You might also find that John's story is familiar because of the multiple opinions at play. Funerals are typically, technically, delivered to a single client, but they are rarely sole-organised in practice. And much as we like to picture a good-natured mourning family, that's not always the reality. Funerals can be fraught and complicated and people do disagree – including to the point of digging up a freshly buried body to retrieve some controversial grave goods (I've only come across that once, though)

We're now at Step 5, and this time things are going to get a little bit real.

If you thought Queen Elizabeth's Coffin Tinder was an exciting detour, buckle up for what's next. Because at this stop on our journey, I'm taking you to London's Vagina Museum.

The Vagina Museum recently (2024-2025) hosted an exhibition called *The Museum of Mankind*. The exhibition explored and satirised the ways historic grave goods have been interpreted, and how future grave goods might be interpreted (or misinterpreted), especially through andocentric and heteronormative lenses. In response, visitors were invited to contribute to a public display of drawings, labelled "your grave goods." They were provided a template – much like the one you see here – and encouraged to draw what they might like to be buried with, and reflect on how those objects told the story of them.

Again, we see grave goods as part of a broader practice of marking someone's unique personality after their death.

I catalogued 1803 of these visitor drawings as part of my research.

1.Clothes and shoes
2.Jewellery and watches
3.Food and drink, tied with electronics and tech
4.Pets
5.Music
6.Books and literature
7.Soft toys and teddies
8.Sex-related objects
9.Flowers and plants
10. Pictures of people

The top ten grave goods which featured in the Vagina Museum exhibition were, in order:

1.Clothes and shoes

2.Jewellery and watches

3.Food and drink, tied with electronics and tech

4.Pets

5.Music

6.Books and literature

7.Soft toys and teddies

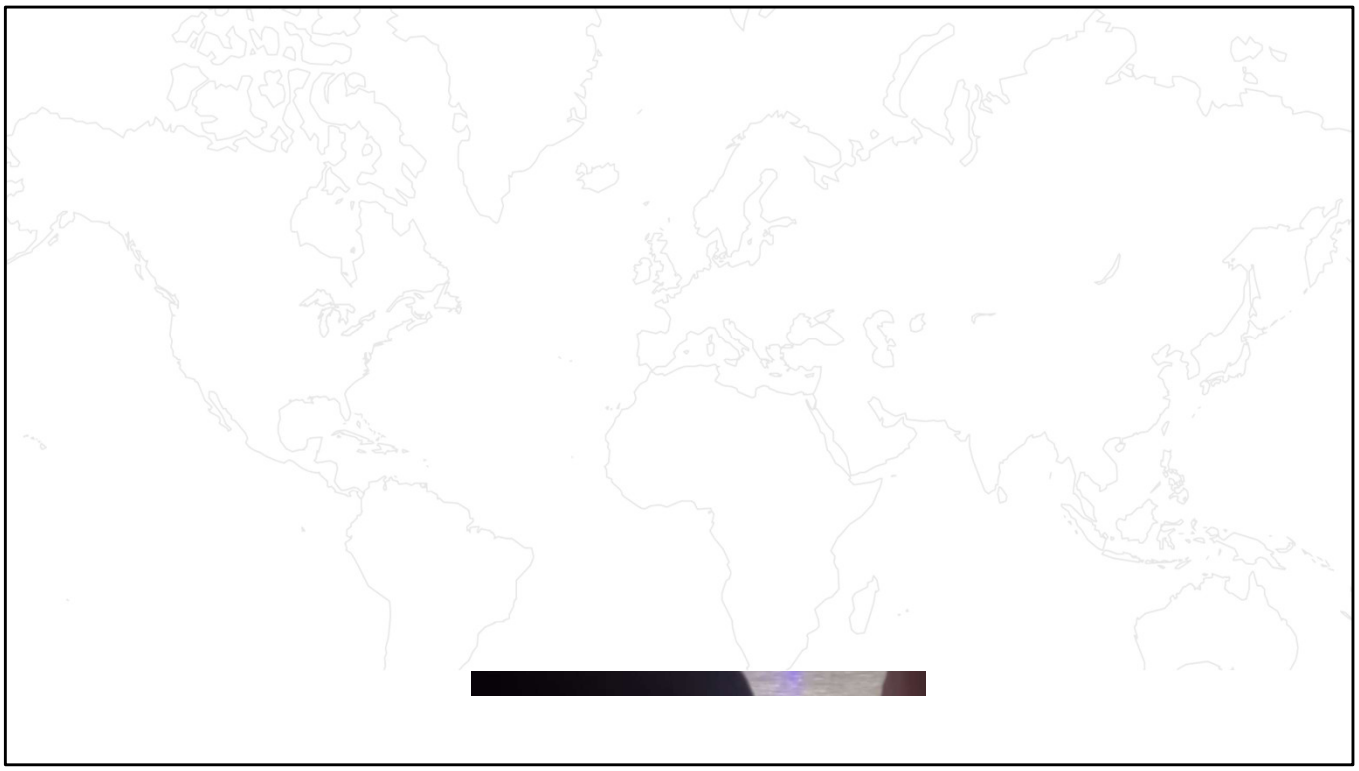
8.Sex-related objects

9.Flowers and plants

10. Pictures of people

But I also spent a lot of time laughing. Because they were hilarious.

The whole space was satirically set up, and that seems to have seeped into the contributions, shaping their tone and contents. At least, I hope not *quite* that many people want to be buried with sex toys or living partners – though each to their own.



Laughter is another buffer we can add. Even as you're thinking about something very close to home – the prospect of your own mortality – there are no rules that say you have to do so with a very serious and singularly sombre constitution. None at all. You are allowed to laugh. You are allowed to dream up the most preposterous possible grave good, without worrying about whether that would 'technically' be allowed. My husband always says popcorn kernels, which a crematorium would definitely frown upon. Back in September 2024 I did a comedy set about grave goods and dressing the dead, and I promise I wasn't the only one in the auditorium laughing. Injecting that levity can be such an important ingredient when you're working with death.

Anything that helps you to do that is a bonus. Because you might – just gradually – get to a point where you can start to concretise your wishes, whether for grave goods specifically or your funeral more broadly. I am yet to come across an interviewee (outside the pandemic context) who wasn't utterly relieved and grateful when they discovered their relative has planned even some aspect of their funeral or memorializing . It's a gift to be able to give those you're leaving behind some sense of direction, whether through a conversation, scribbles on a napkin or a more formal document. So – gently – start thinking about what your template would look

like; and gradually you might get to a place where you're able to communicate that.

Our final destination is thinking about the death of someone we love – in many ways, a weightier decision than one's own death. Death rituals are never just about the dead. They are for the living. And it's almost always the living who make the decisions – especially about grave goods.

According to the YouGov survey, just 3% of people clearly set out their grave goods wishes before they die. That leaves huge chunks of the population planning funerals where they don't know what, if anything, the dead might have wanted.

And the time frame within which a funeral has to happen is the same one when grief is most clouding your vision. If you speak with funeral directors (as I do regularly) they'll tell you that people take in less than 10% of the information they pass on when they first meet them. Grief renders you literally at a fraction of your full decision-making capacity. And yet you have to make decisions, and you've only got one chance to make it.

The trick? Avoid the final destination – think about, and talk about, grave goods and all that go with them before you have to.

Those thoughts – let alone those conversations – might be quite difficult. One of the survey respondents said thinking about what she might hypothetically do for her husband made her cry – which made me cry, because I care very deeply about striking the right, delicate balance between death's seriousness and its scariness in my research. I don't always get that balance right, and certainly not for everybody.

But there are ways to make these conversations softer – just as we've added different buffers on the grave goods journey today, you can add buffers. That might be the comfort of a cup of tea or coffee (or wine, or something even stronger). It might be introducing a light-hearted tone. It might be using some of the weirder and wackier examples of grave goods today to spark a conversation that grows into something meaningful.

But I particularly encourage you to introduce the buffer of time. Because by the time you get to this final destination – or even a stop before it, following a difficult diagnosis – you're no longer in the best frame of mind to think about what you might want or need to do.

It's a curious but definite quirk of the job that I've given so much thought to death and dying at a relatively tender age. But I have, and I'm pleased I have. And I consistently find that these are thoughts and conversations that a lot of people want space to have – so think about the different steps we've worked through today, and think about how you might start to have a conversation yourself.