

NYASHA OLIVER

HOW TO  
BURY  
YOUR  
LOVED  
ONE  
ABROAD



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No-one should have to go through so much unnecessary to and fro when trying to carry out a funeral.

*“She’s gone Angela! Can you believe it? Jesus...”*

I received a call on 11th June that my beloved mum, Melvina Newby, better known as Miss Coolie to everyone, had passed away and immediately flew to Jamaica to arrange funeral arrangements. After hearing the news, my Auntie sobbed for her younger sister when we arrived in St Ann’s and I knew the next two weeks were going to be some of the hardest moments of my life to live through.

Miss Coolie was a well known person in the town of Calderwood. She was like an Iron Fist, but had a sweet side, except when it came to some of her relatives, or the stray dogs she threw a broom at when they tried to come into her house uninvited. Miss Coolie’s absence shook the small town to the core.

I arrived in Calderwood, St Ann’s with my younger sister, Valerie, a week later. Out of my five siblings, she was the one closest in age to me, always lived close and wasted no time to come with me to Jamaica. Calderwood was a second home to me. The sweet smell of burning pimento wood was always in the air and the crickets never stopped chirping every evening. People still said good morning to anyone, if only to start a likkle chat. But the long drive from the airport to my mother’s house also had me mentally preparing my thoughts and how we could bury her in peace. Home is where the heart is, and that home was my mum’s place in Calderwood.

Next to the house was her shop, Junction 5, now officially shut down. The days when Junction 5 was still open and Mum would chat or even cuss every customer or relative whilst serving them drinks including coloured bottles of pop, like Chubby or selling tins of corned beef, were long gone. The times I took my daughters to Jamaica, I remember how often my youngest used to love sitting behind the counter and watching my Mum serve customers.

Thinking about this made me long for my mum to walk out of her house and greet me whilst complaining about her knees. But when me and my sister arrived back to Calderwood, we were met with silence. And when we headed over to Auntie’s house, just two doors down, that silence was accompanied by grief. Auntie couldn’t emotionally and physically take charge. Auntie’s heart had broken at the reality of this

and I couldn’t blame her. I was not coping with the fact that my own mother was gone but I had to be strong for my family.

Some of my family from the UK had arrived in the six days before our arrival to help, including my nephew Mark. But out of my siblings who came, me and my sister, Valerie felt a sense of authority when not much was being done prior to my arrival.

*“Ello, morning! Mi can help yuh wid sumting?”*

Us against them.

All the people from the police station, the diggers and the Administrator of the Parish Council were just doing their job but it always felt like us against them. We were treated as the foreign relatives from across the sea who had a lot of money, but no need for pity. No condolences, no best wishes just documents, signatures and a lot of money swapped hands so much that I had lost track. Along with the emotional pain and grievance I was feeling, like a volcano ready to erupt. I collected the medical certificates and a pink form or the burial certificate from the police station to the funeral station and permission from the Parish Council in the next few days with much difficulty.

The whole process can only be expressed in one word - frustrating. No, two words - frustrating and stressful. There was so much me and my sister were asked about that I had no idea about, like the Title of Deeds and a person with the title of Justice of the Peace. And all I could think was, why are there so many obstacles to just bury my mother? Why couldn’t we just put her to rest?

*“What are we drinking tonight, Angela? Red Stripe or Wray?”*

The few times when I could relax and didn’t feel the burden of responsibility was when I could relax at Mum’s place to eat and drink. Alcohol became a comfort, a saving grace for every hurdle we got through with the bureautic system. The smell of my sister’s cooking one night brought back memories to when my Mum cooked for us. Mum would cook in that small, four wall kitchen where you could just

about fit two people inside. Making her famous rundown and banana porridge that I loved. The table she set the food on was always set on a red plaid cloth. Mum always took pride in it being clean and crisp, with only the condiments and napkins usually present.

We were one step closer to bringing our mother to peace but also one step closer to more stress and the consuming grief that was building up inside.

“Aunty! Let’s go!”

“Where to?”

Two days before the funeral, Mark told me we were going to Hellshire beach one day and I couldn’t be more grateful for the break. It was refreshing to put my feet in the blue sea and eat snapper under the hot sun with my family.

Jamaica is a destination that I always enjoy visiting family and going with them to new places so I welcomed the day to the beach, it was needed. Mum had taken me out on a day similar to back in ‘81. We went to Dunn’s River Falls and to St. Mary’s Parish and it turned out to be one of our best days together. Navigating up the waterfall and holding hands as the rapid water hit our legs was exciting, then heading to St Mary’s whilst eating patties is one of my favourite memories.

*“When di nine nite ah start?”*

Back to reality.

I was so busy with everything that I had forgotten my nephew and sister had organised a Nine Night until another relative asked. A final sign of respect in Jamaica was to have a Nine Night for Mum. Traditionally in my family, people bring food and drink to the grieving family, especially in the UK. Men would bring drinks and the women would bring food. But that was the opposite over here, or so my cousin said. Plates were filled with snapper, hard bread and chicken foot soup to be eaten and a local reggae band played throughout the night soothing my soul for what was yet to come.

“Angela, can you ring the funeral parlour?”

The day of the funeral came and one of my cousins had run down to the house frantically. What more could go wrong?

It turned out that the funeral parlour had spelt mum’s name wrong, with a ‘H’ instead of an ‘M!’ I can’t express how much I wanted to cuss that day but instead Valerie took over on my behalf. I was convinced someone wicked had it in for us.

Nevertheless, after it was corrected, the service was held at Stepney Baptist Church with my mum’s closest relatives, friends and neighbours attending. Except for Aunty, because she was so upset at her sister passing that she did not even attend the funeral. That was when I broke down whilst reading the eulogy. My hands gripped the handkerchief that wiped away the pain and grief that had been bubbling up inside of me as I tried to keep it together...

It felt like a weight was lifted once I could cry, the hardest parts of sending Mum off were done and I could finally let it out.

“Mi soon come back, bless up!!”

I waved goodbye to my cousins and Aunty as I checked back into Montego Bay airport. It was a journey, an emotional and exhausting one. Jamaicans are known to “move slow” but putting to rest a loved one was not something to be relaxed about. It left me dreading the thought of death and the burden my loved ones, especially my daughters, would go through if they had to bury me in this country as I did.

There’s this strange sensation of returning to the past but also the want to move on to the future and getting on with things when death looms over us. I felt that the most with my mum’s and I don’t think many people understand the hardships of burying a parent abroad.

I kept thinking to myself, I love Jamaica but it can do better than this. Because no-one should have to go through this much just to bury a loved one.