

**Letter to my younger self
Excerpts taken from A Letter to young Ashley Denise Gilyard)**

Dear young lady,

I am writing you today to share some memories of before: before failure, illness, pain, rejection, termination, sickness, mental decay, physical decay, and death! Don't look for these in the order listed!

Once there was a time when we laughed at the funny things. Laughed as children playing in the park. Laughed as families gathering for the holidays. Laughed as friends having dinner at Red Lobster. Laughed as colleagues in staff meetings or office parties. Laughed at the jokes. And laughed with the children because they were laughing. Laughed as families preparing to bury loved ones, more so the memories of the deceased.

Although the laughter has been replaced by tears, the tears of the one slowly diminishing before your very eyes, and the tears of the one who personally wishes for a death that will not come, I wish you could have learned these things beforehand, in hopes that it would have made the situations easier to handle. Watching the physical and mental decline of grandmother was a lot for a young teen, later young adult to handle. Grandmother went from the jovial one who laughed at wrestlers throw each other about the ring, and the avid church-goer on Sunday mornings to the one who, in her mind could still walk but no longer could, repel herself from the hospital bed many times; the avid churchgoer, first lady of the church use words that no self-respecting first lady and family matriarch should use. It was to endure that, and even harder knowing that she was missing for almost two weeks because of the Category Five Hurricane Katrina which devastated many. Being separated from her caregiver and could not tell you who she was made it harder to locate her.

And then Watching the physical and mental decline of dad as a young adult. Watching the man who never took pain medicine but prayed his pains away, take medicine was different. Having him accept me as his daughter, even though he already had (it just took me longer to accept him), meant a world to me, the one who knew the name, the existence of her biological father, but had no real memory or knowledge of him. To this day, the biological one exists.

Love came and love went. And pieces of the heart were slowly tearing away at me. I hoped to be here to live longer than I had, but my life was cut short by my own hands. I want to express that it took a long time to come to love myself, and only a short time to hate the person I became and hate the life I lived. When it was no longer me and me became two, I changed overnight because she changed overnight. I wanted to love someone, something like she had loved me, but my opportunities did not come. It's okay to want what you want, and even okay to have what you want, but at what costs would we give to for the things we want? What price would we pay just to say, "I got it. It's mine. You can't have it! It's for me!"

I lost five things that I cherished some before, and some while caring for the one who loved me the most. I lost my grandmother, the matriarch of our bloodline. Although there were losses along the way before and after her, which all had an impact, losing her started the trickled-down

effect of losing ME. I lost my father, and there is a difference between a dad and a father. I had the man whose blood does not course my veins, but the man who provided the necessities I needed to grow into my womanhood. I only wish he could have taught me more. I lost memories and TIME! Time waits for no one. Believe that! Accept that! If I had paid more attention to what the elders tried to teach me, I would remember some things that would help coax me on this journey today. There are so many questions I have that I cannot ask because the memories of old are gone. Some memories of today are gone. I just wanted to know how she handled what she endured, and because I allowed time to escape me, I will never know.