Dear AJ,

I never knew you as Alex, like everyone else. I wish I knew what to say to you. Or really, what I wish I had said to you *sooner*. I wanted to write something to you sooner, but I just couldn't find the right thing to say. Even now, I'm backspacing every second sentence.

When I was little, you were my favorite. And everyone knows that I was sure as hell your favorite too. It was when I was so little, that it was okay to have a crush on your older cousin. I remember sitting next to you and Chris in the back seat of the van, and in my head, I swore I would marry you, all meanwhile giggling to myself in my car seat. When I was that little, we were inseparable. You'd follow me throughout my play, and I pictured you as my protector. You'd push me at the swing on the big hill, and on my Aunt Cindy's swing set. But you'd never push me too high. I remember sitting in front of her house in Deep River. The apartment building one. After being pushed on the swing, and you followed me up to my patch of dirt, and you took those ugly yellowish greenish brown "flowers" I gave you. You pretended you liked them. But they were hideous.

I remember one day, in grade two, I didn't know what to bring into show and tell. I was getting all worked up about it. So my mom told me to bring this little glass teddy bear thing you gave me. It was a teddy sitting inside this little white box stand thing. I don't know how to describe it, but I remember taking it down off the shelf in "the brown room" of the Chalk River house. I remember looking at it, and coming up with this huge speech about it, and us, and how much I loved you. I remember how easy it was to tell my class about it all. I really wish I still had that teddy bear.

Your mom, Aunt Donna used to tell all the younger kids that she was "the Easter Bunny's special helper." She created a big Easter egg hunt in my backyard in Chalk River, and you came over that morning. I remember you in red sweat pants, and a back shirt, with something white on the front. I don't know what though. Or maybe you weren't even wearing that. Maybe I'm just trying too hard to remember any piece of you I can. You followed my every move, and you put every egg you found in my basket instead of your own. I basically only found one egg (which was pink, and you pointed right to it for me to go grab,) and the rest was your work. When everyone finally gathered up, we put all the eggs in a big pile. I was too small to be able to open up any eggs myself. And I remember so vividly you sitting right behind me, opening any and every egg I requested. I remember my mom was there, in a white shirt, and her blue jacket, joking with your mom about how I had you wrapped around my finger. Oh, the good old days.

One day, when I was about 6 (I think?), my dad took us to your house to see your mom. You came out and played at the "Orange Teeter-totter Park" literally right outside your house. You were pushing me on the wing (As always.) and I had a kink in my neck. I guess I had slept wrong the night before. I remember not being able to look to my right, because it hurt my neck. You asked me what was wrong, but I didn't tell you, because I was scared it was something serious, and didn't want anyone to know. I was one strange kid, I know. So I got off the "Magic Swing." You probably don't remember what that is, but it was the swing with the bar that just lifted up, instead of the ones with the permanent bars. I remember the sand was wet, it had just rained, and it stuck to my shoes. I told you I was going in to find my dad. I walked in, and was lost as to where your moms apartment was. I just stood in front of a door on the first floor, looking down at the cartoon "No Smoking" doormat sign thing. I guess you knew I wouldn't know how to get there, because it wasn't long after you came to take me up to her apartment. You were always making sure I was alright.

Another time, I was at your place, to see Aunt Donna and play some silly Neopets with her. You were there, but we didn't talk much. When she went for a nap, we ate some soup together. She left me some fruit cake, and some soy milk. You hid my fruit cake for me, because I didn't like it, and didn't want to hurt Aunt Donnas feelings. But you told me to drink my soy milk :because it was good for me."

You were the first one to show me how to play Nintendo 64. it was really the first game system I ever played. You showed me at Sandy's birthday party. Chris was there too, and so was a whole lot of other people that I really dont remember. You put on Diddy Kong Racing for me and Heidi, and Trillene and Julie. We were too little to remember what we were doing. I kept thinking I was the top screen, but I wasnt. I ended up in the water, stuck at some pyramid thing. I still have Diddy Kong Racing, and know exactly the part I was in the water at. You got me out of the water and restarted that level for me. The next time I played N64, was at your house. After I got bored of drawing on your chalkboard on your bed, you put on James Bond 007 for me. I remember playing with that stupid Blue controller. It was the level with grey floors and wooden doors that slide upwards at the end of the hallways. I thought I was doing good, but I was probably running around aimlessly. You eventually gave me the 007 game, and the blue controller too. I still have them both.

There's so many other days I remember about us. You coming over for all my birthday parties. Playing badminton. Roasting marshmallows over the barbeque. Going to Ryan's Campsite with you. Playing Hide and Go seek Home Run Tag in the backyard with you. Making pine needle toboggan trails on the hill. Maybe that's when you were wearing those red track pants and black shirt. I don't know. But when I think of you, I think of you in that. We played chess, you taught me, and we talked about double jointed fingers, and played Stop Theif together at the kitchen table with my dad and Uncle Neil. But as we got older, we drifted further apart. I wish we hadn't.

When I was about 11 or 12, you came over once, when we were visiting the chalk house. You were teaching me and Heidi to do some stupid fall thingy. I don't even know what it was. I forget it, but it had some fancy name., It was like "the proper way to fall, so you don't hurt yourself." Heidi tried it for like five minutes, and made an excuse and went inside. But me and you stayed outside for hours. Until it was dark and my mom was calling us in. You were showing me sooo many times, because I just couldn't get it right. And I wanted to show you I could do it. I wanted to impress you. You would slowly pretend to flip me to the ground, directing me in every step on what to do. You'd always catch me before I hit the ground. You showed me how you were supposed to hit your hands on the ground, or something. You said it was to distribute the fall or something. To take off some of the pressure. or something fancy. it was a good night. I was never able to really get it, but I did alright I guess. Or at least you told me I did alright.

When I was about 12, you came one day at the end of summer to the Chalk House again. One of my most vivid memories of us, is that day, when you taught me how to drive. You had Aunt Donnas white car, and it was on the empty part of the lawn. The side where the bigger part of the hill was. it was just a big empty space. And you had to choose between me, Heidi and Trillene who to teach, because there wasn't enough gas to teach us all. Heidi was upset, because she wanted to drive. But you picked me. and I felt so good about it. You were sitting in the passenger seat, and I was nervous in the drivers. We basically did little circles, and backwards turns. And forwards again, and around. I was having the time of my life, all as you directed me the right way. You gave me tips the whole time, and I remember us laughing at how i kept making the car

jump, because Id hit the gas, get scared, and let go of it instantly. You never said one bad thing about my driving. You only encouraged.

There's so many things I would like to tell you. I want to prove that you made an impact on my life, and I want to show you that I remember all the little things you did for me. But its too late. It really is. And I'm sorry. I wish I had been a better cousin to you, and got to know you better then I had. I wish we didn't grow so far apart as we got older. Family should never grow apart. The funny part is, I always had this stupid idea, that because we were so close when we were little, that we would become close when we were older. I always imagined us being like 24, drinking over coffee in a shitty cafe in the evening, catching up, agreeing and wondering why it took so long for us to talk again. I guess I forgot how much older you are then me. You were already grown up, and I guess I forgot to get started on the whole catching up plan. I should have a lot sooner. I didn't need to wait till 24. I didn't have to.

I remember when my mom told me about what happened to you. I just got home, from my last day of school, before exams. I sat down on the chair in my living room. You sat on that living room chair before, in the exact same spot. My mom told me she had some news to tell me. And I could tell my the tone of her voice that is wasn't something good at all. She was holding the phone. My mind instantly rushed to the millions of possibilities of what could be wrong, in the split second I had before she told me. I thought maybe the school called, and I did something wrong. Or maybe I wasn't passing due to the number of days I was absent. Or maybe I was in trouble again for some of my graffiti. But it was none of those at all. I really wish it was any of those instead.

I felt like I shouldn't show emotion when she told me. So I tried really hard not to. After, I went straight up to the bathtub. I cried really hard, with the water rushing, so no one could hear me. I didn't want everyone to know how upset I was. I was really hot, and wanted a really cold bath, but I forgot all about it when I was thinking about you and ended up in a sweltering hot bath. Soon I drained the water, but couldn't will myself to get up. I just lay there, in the empty bath crying, holding my hair and covering my face. I turned the water cold, and lay there for longer, crying more. I was remembering all the things about us. And I miss you. My mom walked around the house all day saying things like "Poor Aj, we will miss him" "I hope Donna is okay." and all these other things about you that made it harder not to cry. I lay in my bed for a few hours. I wanted to write you then. But I just didn't know what to say. And I still don't. You'll never read this. But.. I just feel like I have to write this. Or more like I should. Even though I'm saying it *too late*, I at least want to say it once. So it exists. So someone knows what I thought of you. Even if no one hears or understands it but me.

I went to my field later that day. I felt like I just needed to be alone. Its just a bike ride away, and a long trail filled with bugs and big plants to get to this big field surrounded by a thick ring of a few trees. Its my spot really. I just sat there for a few minutes. I like it there because its like the country. and like Chalk River. It reminded me of a big farm. I know you were working on a farm. I dont know much though. My mom said you lived with this farmer family, and worked for them. It sounds like the perfect job to me. I wish I could ask you about it, so I could tell if it would be a good job for me or not.

when I went home, I hesitated, but I went on your facebook, and analyzed everything I saw. Every photo, every post, every note you wrote. I wished I had seen them all before and been able to comment on everything. I wanted to write you to this as a Facebook note, and tag you in it, so it would come up on your wall. But no one wrote anything on your way yet. I'm not sure if it is a safe idea, in case some people don't know yet. I noticed you liked homeschooling and

UNschooling. I completely agree. there is so much more you can learn out in the real work without school I always think of how many better things I could do with my life other then school. I always think that if I was to die tomorrow, Id hate myself for slaving in a lifeless desk for so many days I spent alive. I always thought I would do so much better in life just talking to people. Or painting. or graffittiing things over country roads. Because even then, if I only made a small difference in someones life, or by making them smile for one second with my graffiti, or made someones room feel less dark with my paintings, I would feel so much more successful then 1 million days worth of going to school. I wish we could talk all about it, because I have SO many opinions on it that no one understands. Everyone thinks I'm stupid and I "NEED" and education to be successful. I have a feeling you might disagree. Or at least make me feel a little better about what I believe. Even if its not the same as what you think.

I don't know why this hit me so hard. But it did. Everyone else is upset too. Maybe they are hiding it in the bathtub just like me. Maybe its because we were close when we were little, and I feel bad about not staying that close. Maybe its because I actually wanted to talk again, and I regret we didn't. Maybe its because I wish you could read all I'm saying. I wonder what you thought about, in the last moments. I wonder if I even crossed your mind. Probably not. But I wanted to say Im sorry ayways. I am sorry for every time I could've seen you and I didn't. I'm sorry for how little we've talked the past few years. And I'm sorry I never got a hold of you sooner. I'm sorry I could've been a better cousin. I'm sorry I wasn't there, and I'm sorry you couldn't reach out to me like I wished you could. I knew when I was little that I could never have married you, but I wouldve loved to have you at my wedding. But most of all, I'm sorry I couldn't have been your protector, like you were to me for so many years.

When you got older, everyone called you by your real name. Everyone called you Alex. But you were always only AJ to me.

I Love You AJ.

-Andy.