

Fifty Five Dollars

Year 9 Literature | Speculative Fiction

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Julie walked farther into the airport. It was small, like her hometown of Ellensburg, Washington. Unlike the other airports she had seen, Ellensburg Airport had no advertisements, billboards or anything eye-catching. It was rare to see many people there.

Julie searched the small crowd for familiar fluffy dark hair, a long neck, a lean figure and simple clothing. Sam had promised to arrive before her flight landed, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and began typing a furious message. Jetlag and exhaustion only fuelled her anger. Then her thumbs froze above the keyboard.

For a second, the black space behind the words became something else. In the glass of her phone screen, Julie saw headlights rushing through darkness. A white car swerved across a wet road. Metal folded beneath the front of a truck, and a familiar hand went still against the steering wheel.

Julie blinked. The vision vanished. Her unfinished message stared back at her as though nothing had happened.

She looked around the quiet airport. Nobody else seemed to have noticed. It had to be exhaustion, she told herself. Still, she deleted the message and carefully considered what to do next.

Sam always wanted to please Julie and make sure she was not upset with him. Sending an angry message would only make him panic. She imagined him struggling to choose between staying with his friends a little longer and racing across town so his girlfriend of three years would not be left waiting. She also thought about Taylor, Sam's best female friend, who already disliked her. Julie did not want to give Taylor another reason to hate her.

After five minutes, which felt like hours, Julie made a plan. She would not bother Sam. Instead, she would hire a cab home and perhaps scold him a little at school the next day.

She opened the Ellensburg Taxi Service app, but stopped when she saw the price. A taxi late at night cost fifty-five dollars. That was fifty-five dollars from the money she had saved to surprise Sam with a trip to Japan during the summer.

A month in Japan would be expensive. Julie had worked several tiring and stressful jobs to save enough for flights, accommodation and spending money. She was often so exhausted that even her stern English teacher had begun to look concerned. Yet the image of the crushed white car remained in her mind. If Sam rushed to the airport, he could receive a fine, be injured or face something worse that Julie did not even want to imagine.

Before she could decide, a message from Sam appeared.

'I lost track of time, sorry! It takes an hour to get to the airport, but I'll arrive as fast as I can.'

Panic rose in Julie's chest. Without thinking, she typed back.

'Don't bother. I'm home. I took a cab.'

She watched the three dots of the typing bubble float across the screen.

'A cab late at night? You should've called me. It's fine now. Sorry again. See you tomorrow. ❤️❤️'

Julie blushed at Sam's affection and kindness. It felt as though his warmth travelled through the screen and wrapped around her in a comforting embrace. Then she remembered what she had written.

Now that she had told Sam she was home, she had no choice but to pay for the expensive cab and lose part of her savings. Although she felt dejected, she reminded herself that fifty-five dollars was better than making Sam race across town. She booked the cab and walked out of the airport.

The next morning, Julie's eyes shot open as her alarm blared.

6:00 am

She rubbed her eyes and headed downstairs, where her mom was watching the morning news. As Julie descended the stairs, she remembered the fifty-five dollars she had spent the previous night. Guilt returned – until she saw tears streaming down her mom's face.

'Why are you crying? What happened?'

Her mom looked up, confusion spreading across her tear-streaked face.

'Sweetie, come and look at this. Isn't that Sam's car?'

Julie froze and ran to the television. The news showed a crushed white car beside a damaged truck on Airport Road – the same road Sam would have taken to reach her. The car was the same model and colour as his. Emergency workers surrounded a person covered by a sheet.

The newsreader explained that the collision had occurred shortly after midnight. Julie realised it had happened only minutes after she had sent her message to Sam. A wave of nausea hit her. The scene was exactly like the image that had flashed across her phone screen.

Then the camera moved closer to a photograph of the driver. The young man's features looked nothing like Sam's.

Julie could recognise Sam anywhere: his dark, soft hair that she ruffled whenever they spent time together; his long neck; his tall, lean frame. She was certain that the person in the news was not him.

'Julie, you told me he was picking you up from the airport last night, didn't you?' her mom asked. 'The crash happened around that time. I'm so sorry, sweetheart.'

Julie ran upstairs and rummaged through the items on her desk for her phone. Her eyes filled with tears. Even though she was certain the person who had died was not Sam, she needed to hear his voice.

She scrolled through her contacts until she found Sam's name followed by a ridiculous number of red hearts. Her hand shook as she pressed Call.

Sam answered after two rings.

'Julie? What's wrong? It's six in the morning.'

At the sound of his voice, Julie dropped to her knees and cried with relief.

The image on her phone had not been caused by exhaustion. Somehow, it had shown her what might have happened if Sam had driven to the airport. Her small lie had closed one possible future and opened another.

Julie looked at the receipt from the taxi still lying beside her phone. Fifty-five hard-earned dollars no longer seemed like a loss. It was a cheap price to keep Sam from slipping away for eternity.