

Blue - Amy (SeoWon Kim)

Isa:

The snow continuously falls from the sky.

As soon as it stops, it falls again, and then it piles up again. Again, and once again.

I don't even know how many months it's been.

When I go outside, people stand still, out in the snow.

They seem like they are playing freeze tag, frozen like solid ice, but they don't move even when I let them free.

I heard that it is because they faced too many extremely cold blue storms... Honestly, I don't really know.

Well, everyone said they didn't know and just held on, without understanding.

Still, I worked up my courage and decided to go out and find my mom and dad.

My mom and dad are far away from here, so we decided to look for Soren's mom and dad first.

Soren's mom and dad went out to get food a week ago and didn't come back...yet.

He's the guy next door with a mechanical leg. When I knocked on the door, he opened it for me.

He's 10 years older than me. At first, he was blunt and scary, but now it's okay.

The cold wind outside makes scratchy sounds as usual, like people screaming for help. Soren's looking through my notes to fix the mistakes I made in writing practice. He kept nagging at me and gave me a notebook to draw and practice writing instead of talking.

"Are there THAT many mistakes? I hear a lot of marking sounds today," I ask, unable to hold onto the boredom. Soren replied immediately, as if I was being annoying. "Yes. There's a lot." Even his reply to mine sounds a little dry; he always adds a few extra words, trying to start a conversation.

“... and you’re not supposed to be smart enough when you’re 8.”

“But, how about you?”

“Probably 10 years smarter than you. Obviously”

“Really? A high schooler teasing an elementary student??”

“I’m not a student. Nor are you. We can’t even go to school.”

“Don’t say that! Mom and Dad said after 100 nights I’ll be an elementary school student.

And they will come back. They promised...”

“But they didn’t.”

...then, we each throw in other effortless, uncaring words. The fire that lies beneath us runs out, like it was waiting for our conversation to end.

Soren lit a fire again, bringing in more firewood. It seemed like he was looking at my mood, kind of regretting what he said, I hope. “...Where are your parents? Busan?” he let out a sigh with his words. “Yeah... we lived in front of the ocean. Me, my mom, and my dad...”

Whoosh! The howling of wind interrupted. I couldn’t get used to the sound of wind, even though it happens every day, frequently. I hugged my knees and tried not to look at the harsh storm out the window.

“You don’t need to get scared. It’s just wind...” Soren said, getting up stiffly. He limps over to lock the door and pushes it shut tighter, clicking the lock until it is hard in place. It didn’t help much. The cold still crept through the cracks.

I couldn’t answer him right away. My eyes were fixed on the fire, small and struggling. Maybe I just wanted to be grumpy for no reason, or I was just sad that Soren didn’t have much empathy. The wind screamed again. Trying to ignore the sounds, I asked, “Soren, after you find your mom and dad, you’ll take me home too, right?”

He paused. Not looking at me at first. "...It's too far from here," he said finally. I frowned a little. The wind is still interrupting, rattling something outside. I sat up straighter.

"If you're scared to go far, once we get to Busan, I'll give you a gift."

Soren blinked, speechless, as if I had said something weird.

"A gift?"

"Yes, a gift." I said confidently, but I guess *gift* doesn't work for Soren. He shook his head, looking away. "No...it's not about getting scared..." Just then, a huge blast slammed the window. The fire flickered like it might go out again. My hands felt too cold, automatically making me shiver from the coldness that wraps the whole area. It was blue again. Soren looked over at me, not saying anything for a second. Then he said softly in a calming tone, "...Let's just go to sleep for now, it's getting dark, and the blue is falling." I nodded, my throat feeling tight and sore.

Sometimes, it snows blue, instead of white.

Blue snow. Never piles up. Only falls.

Soren called it blue, as it is.

If you get too much blue on you, you stop like the people outside.

Standing still. Never move.

Soren said the world is ruined because of the ongoing blue winter.

Soren:

"Achoo!" Isa seems like she got a cold. I gotta fix my prosthetic leg and go outside to meet the uncles from the church my parents used to visit.

The snow is relatively light today. Yet. but the air still hurt my nose when I breathed them in. The church was farther than I thought, farther from what my memory remembers, from a year

ago. I recognized one of the uncles. Someone who would have known my parents before everything started to be destroyed. He looked tired. Everyone did. He still remembered me. Maybe because of my limp. I asked him what I wanted to know. Where my parents went, and if they made it. He hesitated. He couldn't promise anything, but pointed carefully near the pharmacy over the valley of snow, the last place they saw my parents heading to. While he talked, Isa's cough echoed in my ears. The sound she made right before I left. Too quiet to scare anyone, but enough to scare me. "Cough, cough"

"Just that girl...can you guys please take her with you?"

"Isn't that your sister?"

"No." I said, "She's not mine. We're just neighbors...but her grandmother died a few days ago. I can't leave her alone, so I take her with me. I think she got a cold." He let out a big sigh. "I'm sorry. As you know, it's a very difficult disaster for everyone. We don't have enough food to take in anymore." I tensed my hands into fists.

"I...I'm not in a position to take care of anyone either..."

"Come visit with your parents later if you find them." He said after a pause. "I'll tell the pastors. There's a pharmacy near where your parents were last seen, so go and see for yourself."

"Hey kid!" he called me back, tossing me a chocolate bar. "Share this. I'm giving this to you, but keep it between us, so put it in your pocket. Quickly. It looks like another storm is coming soon, so find a place to hide and light a fire." The chocolate bar was divided into half, not four, when I opened it. This sounded like a consolation to me, like he was telling me what I would see. Like he was expecting that I would visit the church by myself again, the next day. Words didn't come out easily from my mouth. I wanted to refute it so badly, the fact that I might be alone from now on.

"...Thanks." But this was the only word I could process in this situation.

Isa:

He limps towards me. Is he done talking now? His hair was messy from the cold, looking much more tired than before. He just walked, without saying much, and I asked anyway.

“Are you done?”

“Yeah.”

“Did they tell you where your mom and dad went?”

“Mhm.”

His voice, reply was even more dry than before, like he was already expecting what he might find. I didn’t ask for more. The silence continued.

That night, my fever made everything blurry and dull. I was scared and Soren calmed me. Soren is already like an adult. He talks well with other adults, gets food from them, knows the way, finds a place to rest, and even knows how to make a fire. He knows a lot, and he is not afraid. Even when I’m sick, he takes care of me. Really well. He often falls, but never cries. I’m glad he’s with me.

Soren:

“Isa. Get up.” I said, sitting beside her. “Drink some warm water and dry yourself.” her cheeks were red and damp. I soaked a towel back into the cold water again, wrung, and put it on top of her forehead. The fire was getting weaker. Only one piece of firewood left. I stared at the lighter left on the ground. *What should I do if the lighter runs out?* I don’t know how to light a fire. I never learned...

Mom would bring the fever down with a cold towel like this when I was little. I always smelled boiled ginger honey tea. *Is this the right thing to do? Is it not okay to do this when you have a cold? What if she gets even sicker?*

"It's cold..." Isa mumbled with a voice barely above a whisper. "I said it's cold... ?" Her words woke me. I looked down at her. Her eyes looked blank, out of focus. "Hold on." I replaced the towel. The heat of her skin scared me. I lingered my finger a few seconds longer. Not because it helped. But because of what would happen if I moved it. *I don't know anything. What should I do...* I was seeking help from my mom unconsciously. And it wasn't only me.

"Mom..." she whispered, voice trembling. "Mom..." She calls, this time louder. Her eyes start to tear up, curling her fingers around the blanket. I sat, looked at her. She looked so small under the blanket. So fragile. So alone. Her cry made my throat close. I swallowed hard, and stood up all of a sudden.

"I'll go get some fever reducers." I said, grabbing my coat. "Stay asleep, okay?"

"No. don't leave me alone..." She whined.

"You gotta rest. You're sick."

"No. I'm scared to be alone!" I paused in front of the door, hesitating. The wind caused a hard blizzard at night. "Haa..." I turned back to her, kneeling down again. "Just hold on this one time. I won't leave you alone again."

She looked up at me, eyes full of tears. "No... I want to go home. Mom..."

"You gotta stop coughing to go back home."

She sniffled. "Will you bring me home if I stop coughing?" This was a kind of question that makes you feel guilty. The kind of question that little kids ask for your responsibility. "... yeah." I said. Probably not a definite promise that I can make. "Then I'll wait." She answered, her shoulders relaxed a bit. I tucked the blanket tightly around her. "I'll be back soon. I'll just check if Mom and Dad are here, then stop by the pharmacy and come back right away. It won't take

long. She nodded, holding her notebook close to her. "Draw something in the notebook if you're bored." For a moment, I imagined something impossible. Isa in her house by the beach, and... me next to her with her family, all together. *What if I belonged there too? What if we could have been happy?*

I hesitated once more. She looked up at me as if I were the only grown-up in this world. I wasn't. But I had to be for her. It wasn't guilt anymore. It wasn't a pity. It was something deeper. I saw myself in her. A child left behind, the one who still waited. I didn't want her story to end like mine had. Not again. Not for her. She is the only one who made this place feel like it still had people in it, and I had to make her feel the same.

The moment I stepped out the door, the wind started to scream at me, something I didn't want to hear. This time for a long while, I wasn't just surviving for myself.

*What if blue falls on the way back?* These thoughts have been filling my head ever since I left. *I shouldn't have left her alone.* Every time I thought of this, I pictured Isa in a half-warm sweater, her cough echoing in the empty room where only Isa is left. *What if we miss each other on the way?* What if I get there and she is already looking for me? Despite the thought I had for a moment, the freezing coldness brought me back to my senses. I fixed my scarf, tightened it. The opaque smell of my house made me relieved for a bit.

Then, I saw them. Two figures ahead of me, blurred by the snow. *No...It couldn't be. That's dad's scarf...!* I ran. Snow pulled my leg, especially the one that is not fully mine. But I kept running. Following that little scent of hope, hope that they are still alive. *They were coming.* "Mom, dad...!" The wind snatched my voice. It couldn't quite reach there. "Mom, Dad?" The response, or any other sound of response, never came back. Only a sharp wind scratches my ears. *No. No, no...!* I got closer, too close, only to see no movement, but silence. The snow around them was too clean. Not even a footprint.

*They couldn't avoid blue. They couldn't make their way out of the blue.* At that moment, all I could feel was emptiness. I reached out to them, but couldn't touch them. I was afraid they would fall apart like dust. And leave me alone, forever, gone away without even saying goodbye. I just stayed there. The sky darkened. And blue started to fall. Soft snowflakes. They looked almost beautiful and tempting, glowing in the night sky. And I knew what they meant, better than anyone. They mock my treatment. *What do you want me to do...alone? I should have held onto someone. I don't even know how to get through a world like this. I can't even walk properly. My leg aches. My lungs burn. I'm just so, so tired.*

I looked up at the sky. Blinking through the snow, blue. Blue that freezes people to death in a few minutes. Clueless blue, beautiful, brutal. *It might be better not to avoid it... If I just give up and let blue have me too and stay with them...* I hold on to death tightly, like a rope that will transport you, and swing out on it, hoping only to land far away from where you are. This was my plan B. Better than failing. Better than surviving and being blamed. Better than taking responsibility. But, "Ah...fever reducer..." I looked down at my hand. I still had it. A small box crumbled in my glove. I'm supposed to bring this back to her. Isa's waiting. She said she'd wait if I promised. I tried to make myself think that I am leaving them to save one's life. But in fact, this was the only choice I had. To go back to her.

Isa:

It's cold. The fire Soren lit had gone out. I don't know when. Maybe when I was asleep. I woke up to the knocking sound by the window, swung by the loud wind. It sounded like someone was trying to get in or was calling for help. My cough didn't stop. My head was dizzy, my eyes still blurry, my lungs felt rattled. It was really, really scary to stay alone in the house. But I waited, as I promised Soren. He will come back soon.



He said to draw something if I am bored, so I drew. First, Soren. Then me next to him. And then my mom and my dad next to me, on the beach. A blue-blue beach. A warm kind of blue. I dreamed of us all together there. My mom and dad helped me to find shiny little shells in the sand, and Soren, standing away from us. I waved at him, but didn't react in any way... "Look!" I shout. "Look at the water!" Soren doesn't reply. But this is the gift... The blue of the warm ocean that might make you happy... *What if he actually did not come back like the dream? What if I can never show him the gift?* And as if it's planned, blue falls. Not the snow that piles up that makes you harder to move around. The snow that might kill people. Blue.

*Soren's still outside...!* I stared out the window. I couldn't see much, but blue. Then I stared back at the drawing. The silence in this empty room started to get way too loud. I had to go. I had to go bring him back. I looked around and saw the umbrella Soren kept near the door. The old one, with one broken arm. I wrapped myself in a scarf, one that smelled a little like him. And I took the umbrella. "I'm just going out for a second," I whispered. Either to myself or Soren, who might find me gone when he's back. "Just a few steps. So I can see better."

The umbrella opened with a click. It swung hard, being pulled by the harsh wind outside, but it was better than nothing. I stepped out. The shocking coldness grabbed me right away. The snow didn't fall like snow. It stung, like a blue glass falling from the sky. I stepped forward. One, two. I stepped about ten steps from the door. That was all. I thought, if I can see him coming back, just spot him through the snow, I will run back inside. And I won't be scared anymore. But the freezing air made it hard to breathe. Blue was everywhere. It grabbed me like smoke. My hands started to hurt. Not sharp, but dull, like stone. I lost my grip on the umbrella, and it fell. My legs felt heavy. Everything felt so...slow. Like I was falling asleep but standing up. I couldn't move my legs, nor feel them. The wind howled, I flinched. Curling myself a little bit to hide from blue. Then, I saw him. Far away. Just the shape. Limping towards me. My heart jumped. I wanted to call out to him and wave. But I couldn't. My body didn't move as I wanted. And then, I

felt it. Like an ice crawling from my toes, slowly upwards. I couldn't move anymore. Still looking at Soren. And the blue kept falling on both of us.

Soren:

Every step away felt like betrayal, but it was also a step closer to Isa. I walked past frozen things. People, animals, and memories, without looking closely. I couldn't. The cold started to crawl up where my prosthetic ended. Every few steps, I had to shake off the snow from the joint. I couldn't feel my fingers. I didn't stop. I couldn't. Only a single thought circled in my head. *She's waiting.* I moved faster, stumbling. *Please, please, please just stay asleep. Please still be inside.* As I pushed myself towards her, a relief also pushed me each step. But I stopped. I saw someone. In the snow. Lying in the white, just a few feet from the door. I knew that coat on that someone. Really well.

I couldn't move. "...Isa..." I kneeled down, like I usually did to adjust the eye level. "Is that you..." It was her. She was slightly curled, with her notebook tucked inside her arms, mouth open as if she was trying to call me. Her cheeks were pale blue. Her body was still. So still. I touched her hands, cold and stiff. I wanted to wake up so bad, if this was a dream. *I'm late. I wasn't supposed to be late.* I shook her shoulder, calling her name several times. And of course it didn't pull her back. "Isa...look. I'm here. I brought it. Here's the medicine, see?" I pulled the box out of my pocket with my numb fingers, shivering. "You just have to take it. We'll get warm again. I can make fire, I can..." She didn't move. Around her was a tiny umbrella and footsteps. *She looked for me.* When I was chasing people who were already gone, she looked for me. In the storm. She must've been so cold. Alone. *She was only ten steps away. I should've come back faster. I should've walked ten steps faster. She was the only one who waited for me...* My face started to ache. My throat felt cloaked. My mouth was trembling. I pressed my

forehead against hers, barely breathing. It was cold. Really cold. When I couldn't even feel any temperature from her, the only warmth I felt was the tears running down my face. It was not just warm, it was burning. "I told you... to wait for me..." I sobbed, "I'm sorry Isa... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been late. I should have walked faster. I'm sorry."

And I knew that she had waited as long as she could. Blue fell on both of us. I stood. Carrying her inside, in one arm, light and stiff. I let her down on where she was supposed to be. I lay down next to her. In my hand is the fever reducer that I couldn't quite give her, my eyes are once again resentful of the falling blue outside the window. The pages of the sketchbook turn, loosened by the wind. In the picture, Isa, her parents, and I are standing happily in front of a beautiful blue beach. But the only reality left to me is that blue took her cough away.

*If this wasn't real... If it were warm blue instead of cold blue...If I made out the promise...*

It's warm. The wind doesn't scratch me. It just passes through my face like a soft breeze. Just a breeze. I open my eyes, and everything is blue. Not the brutal kind of blue that burns the skin and stops the heart, but gentle and bright. Blue. It seemed that everything was blue. The color of sky pressed into the ocean. The sand, grass and leaves. The air. Even the delicate sounds of waves. Blue, yet warm. The kind of blue that holds you.

I lay down on the beach, feeling the fresh breeze with my whole body, letting all my worries disappear with it. The ocean spreads in front of me, sparkling, so bright, like it was waiting for someone to look at it. The noise of soft, happy laughter tickles my ears. When I turn to see where the laughter is coming from, I see her. Isa. She's running across the beach barefoot, her thick, heavy coats thrown aside, with a small, messy ponytail. Then she smiles. Smiles so big, her whole face is lifted upwards. When I turn again to see where she is smiling, I

see her parents. They're kneeling down next to her, helping her to find shiny little shells. Isa turns around and waves at me. "Look!" She shouts in excitement. "Look at the water!"

I take a few steps forward, My leg doesn't hurt. The sand doesn't pull me down like the snow. Everything feels light. She points at the Ocean and says, "This is the gift! Does this make you happy?" Her words echo like they've melted in the air. "Yes...Thank you." I answer, not knowing what else to say. Then she runs back to her parents. Three of them stand together, their backs towards me, framed by the warm blue of sky and ocean. The picture I have seen before.

No...the picture Isa drew in her notebook.

This is it. This is the drawing brought to life. I stood alone in the instant, yet beautiful paradise. There was no coldness or sadness here, where only warmth exists.

I wouldn't...no, I can't wake up if this is a dream. I can't leave all of these behind me, and go back to where I was. Where they're all gone. no, No, NO, That's not happening. I want to stay here. I want to walk towards them...!

But the tide is coming in. As I blink, the dream fades away.

Carrying her, I went to meet the church people I had met before.

"It's warm water. Drink it." He handed me a cup. "Thanks," I murmured. "You're a strong kid," he said, "You'll be able to endure even the tough times."

"...okay." I didn't know if he really meant it or if he just didn't know what else to say.

Then he asked, carefully. "So...are you here to pray for her?"

"No...I just wanted to ask for directions," I said, "I gotta go to Busan, but I don't know the way." The people in the church stared at me like I had said I would walk to the moon.

"Busan?" one of them said, frowning. "You're willing to go that far in this snow?"

"Yeah. Here," I unfolded a piece of paper. "I picked up a random map."

There was a long pause. Then, surprisingly, few of them started to make the routes on the map, busily discussing where the safest route is, and which is the shortest.

“Maybe the snow is thinner to the south of Daegu.”

“There’s an abandoned highway there. It might save some time.”

For a second, I thought they cared and understood. But then, one of the people spoke out.

“But...why isn’t anyone stopping him?” I could feel everyone going silent, slowly turning their head towards him. “A young boy is trying to run through this blizzard all by himself, thinking he might die. Why isn’t anyone stopping him?” My jaw clenched. My hands holding the map shook a little. He turned to me. “Hey, don’t carry a dead person and go alone. Stay here with the adults.” These were the words that broke the silence. They started complaining to him, that of course, letting one more in carries a lot of burden to them.

“We don’t even have food for ourselves right now, stop acting nice, you idle!”

“That’s right! Why do WE have to take responsibility?”

“Didn’t he go look for his parents? Why is he back alone?”

“Oh my god, he wouldn’t be here if he found them, obviously!”

Then the worst one came. “Can’t you see? The little girl is already dead. He can’t even take responsibility for himself,” people added up sharp words like they have been suppressing them throughout.

“That useless bastard’s leg is even disabled!”

“You also have some kind of mental issue, no? Holding on to a dead body all day?”

I didn’t answer them for a while. Just gripping tighter on Isa, thinking she might fade away by those hurtful words. I just said, “I just have to make the promise out.” My voice was trembling. “I never asked to stay or get protected here.” I held out the map again. “Just...I just need to know the directions.” No one answered, or even looked at me. The silence only helped me to realize my status in this world. “...sorry.” I mumbled in a dry voice. “I’ll leave now,” and I did. No one

stopped me from leaving. I left the church as if I were running away. I felt like I had to. No one stopped me from leaving.

A lot of things came into my mind, walking away. *Orphan, disabled, helpless, unlucky.* I tried not to think of anything, or even other things. It didn't help. I used to hide under my parents after this disaster happened. And now I can't do that anymore.

All I see is snow, still falling, cold, blue or white, all the way long. No matter which way I turned, the wind came up and kept screaming as it rushed through the empty buildings or snow-covered highways. The driving snow attacked me, a thousand sharp needles. Signs on the streets were no longer in use, pointing to somewhere not certain. All I could rely on was the marked route on the map. I had to fix my prosthetic several times because of the snow creeping through the joints. I wouldn't have minded my prosthetic if Isa wasn't on my back, wrapped with her scarf. Light as always, but her silence weighed more than anything. I sometimes stepped on frozen figures, curled beside the broken vending machine, or under a thin snow. No one moved. No one did for a long time.

On the fifth day of walking, I ran out of food. I tried chewing on ice to keep my mouth wet. But it didn't fill my hunger. I stayed in shelters when I found them. Bus stations, the back of trucks, an abandoned store or a motel room that smelled like ash. There was some food left in these places, but not really edible.

I didn't count the days from then. I just walked towards where the ocean is. I didn't talk much. Not even to her. Only once, when I passed a frozen playground, I stopped and whispered. "You would've wanted to stop here."

I kept going. When I saw the sign: Busan, 19km, my legs moved faster. Almost on their own. It still snowed endlessly. But finally, I stopped walking. I reached there. The ocean. Crashing towards the frozen sand, grey and loud. No one was there. Not even a sound, but the

ocean and the wind. I stood there, holding her in my arms, trying to imagine the drawing. The drawing where she, her parents, and I stand in front of the warm blue ocean.

On the empty ground of snow, where only two of us remained, I couldn't stop the snow from falling, but made sure it didn't fall on her alone.

I was exhausted, and yet I had a difficult time falling asleep. Over and over, I saw the scene of Isa walking hand in hand with her parents on the beach, a continuous loop playing in my dream. Believing it was impossible. I woke many times throughout the night, arms prickly and at odd angles, the blanket twisted tightly around my ankles, the scarf on the snow, and fell into a deep sleep as blue started to fall, softly.