From Same	Water	Flowing
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Aissata

SALL, Aissata Alien #_____ b. Nzerekoré, Republic of Guinea, 3/5/1963 Married, two biological children, two adopted

Left Conakry, Guinea 8/11/2004 with son Boubacar, aged 17; arrived New York, 8/12/2004, on connecting flight from Morocco.

Application for asylum based on political persecution by government of General Lansana Conté due to membership in political party opposing, among other government actions, constitutional amendment granting to Conté the right to run indefinitely for re-election.

Conduit

The interpreter as a neutral conduit interprets everything that is said, adding nothing, omitting nothing, and changing nothing. [...] **Conduit** is the role on which interpreters should fall back if there is any uncertainty about which role they should play.

(From "Roles of an Interpreter," Language Access Project, Community Legal Services, Inc.)

The second time I interpreted for Aissata, she wanted to know:

Is my attorney competent? How could he have made this mistake?

I knew it wasn't the attorney but the judge's clerk who had made the mistake,

the mistake that meant Aissata's hearing would be delayed six months.

I repeated Aissata's questions. I repeated the attorney's answers.

I kept myself invisible.

The fourth time I interpreted for Aissata, she wanted to know:

How can this be happening? How is it that Boubacar is telling me only now, two days before the hearing, that he and his buddies had a run-in last month with the police, who could get him sent back to Guinea?

I repeated Aissata's questions. I repeated the attorney's answers.

I kept myself transparent.

Half a year later, after her case has been won, Aissata and I have coffee. She tells me

a secret, pressing on my mind like a nose against glass.

The secret has nothing to do with her case.

I keep it.

I keep it here.

Consecutive

For the first time the attorney asks her, in our final practice before the hearing, "Where do you think your husband is now?"

"He's dead," we expect her to say quickly, Aissata the strong, the clear-eyed. Instead she hesitates, then says finally, "I don't know" – her voice breaking – "sometimes I console myself by thinking, maybe he's in the Maison Centrale [the largest prison, in Conakry], but other times I think, *non*, *c'est pas possible*, it's not possible – that blow to the head – he's dead."

* * *

He is

where no one knows

where he is

où il se trouve

Il est où, votre mari?

Your husband, where is he, could he

possibly be

anything other than not?

Aissata's voice then my voice

her

voice then my voice following

Parfois je me console Sometimes I console myself

"consecutive

interpreting" the manual calls it I call it finding a path

We each live elsewhere but not at this moment we tell a single story C'est pas possible It's not possible and yet each of us a deer stepping carefully through woods, sounding the half-dark ears alert, nostrils open breathing what may come she pauses I pause she bows I bow our heads bending low drink from the same water

flowing