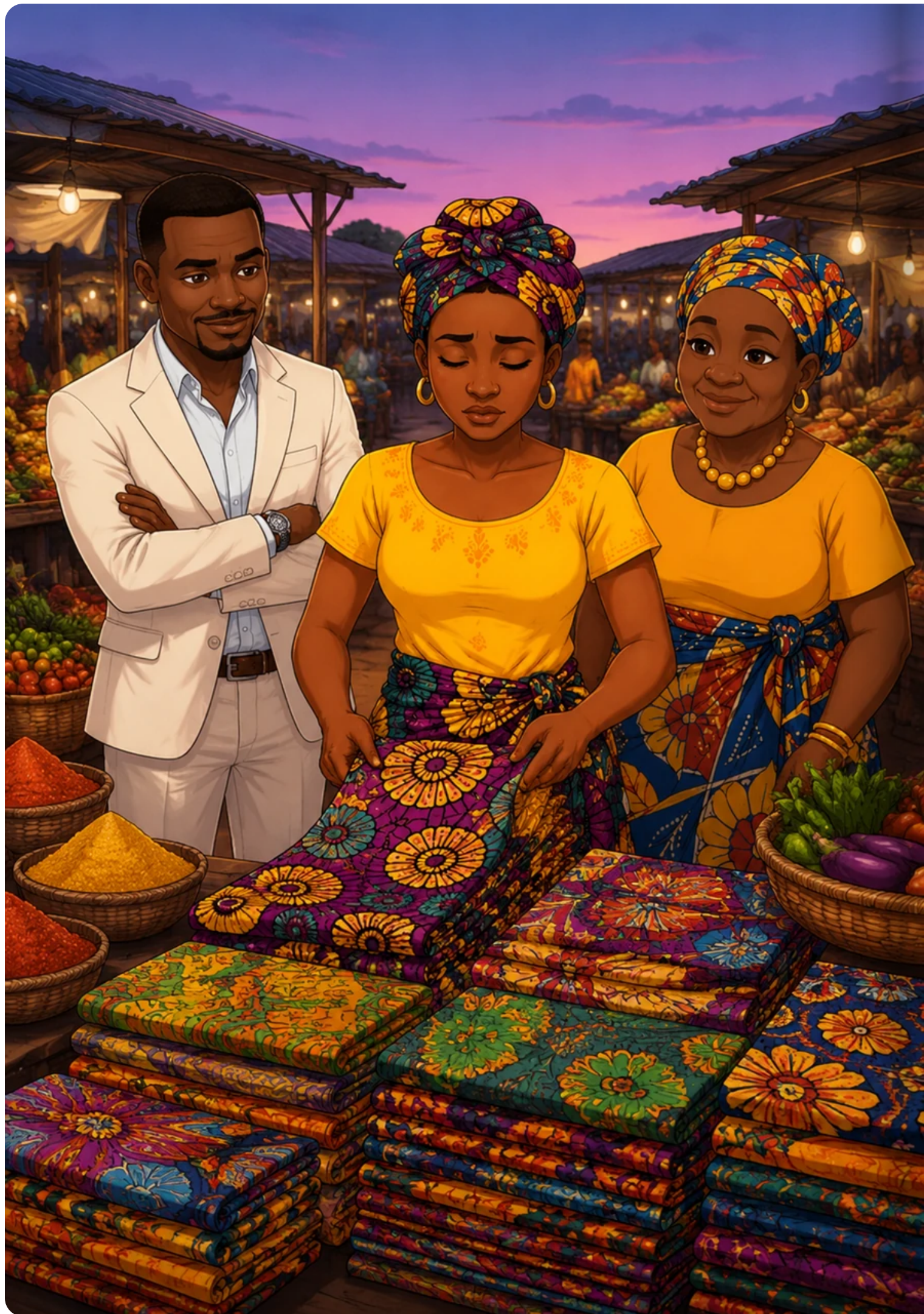




# The Shadow of the Black Pagne

Theodora Aboua





Before dawn breaks over the vibrant Adjamé market in Abidjan, vendor stalls come alive with colorful fabrics, pungent spices, and rows of fresh produce. Twenty-eight-year-old Aïcha works tirelessly at her fabric stand, a spot she has managed alone since her mother passed away, leaving behind debts and three younger siblings to care for.





Aïcha's phone vibrates against the tied pagne cloth at her waist, bringing urgent news from her village relative. Her family desperately needs money for her younger brother's school tuition, her uncle's medicine, and repairs for their leaking roof. Closing her eyes, she feels the overwhelming weight of endless responsibilities pressing down on her fragile shoulders.





Mid-morning brings an elegantly dressed man named Mr. Koffi to Aïcha's modest market stall. With a sleek suit and gleaming watch, he looks out of place among the dusty aisles, casually observing that she works too hard to remain poor. He hints at connections with wealthy figures in the city center and offers her a deal that could change her family's future forever.





Mr. Koffi outlines a dubious proposition to route illicit money through her bank account and use her business as a front. In exchange, he promises to settle her mother's lingering debts, fund her brother's education, and help her open a luxurious boutique in the city center. Aïcha gazes down at her worn, calloused hands, torn by the tempting proposal, and asks for time to think.





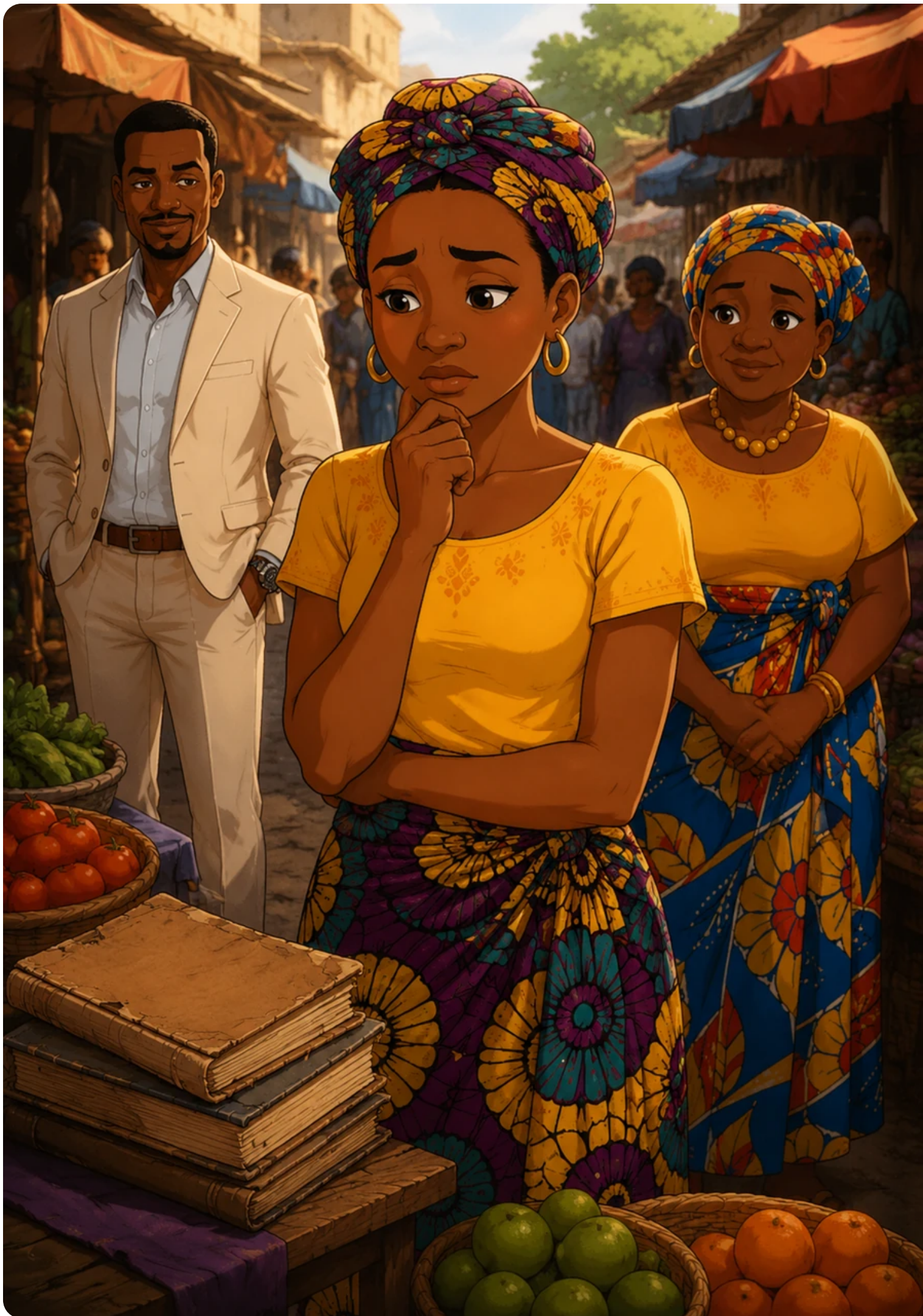
Returning to her dim single room late that night, Aïcha gazes at a faded black pagne cloth hanging reverently on her wall. The cloth belonged to her late father, who tragically died five years ago without proper medical care. She touches the coarse fabric, echoing his final words in her heart that money comes and goes, but a clean family name lasts forever.





The next morning, Aïcha confides in Fatou, an elder spice vendor whose wisdom is respected by everyone in the market. Fatou listens quietly before warning her that quick wealth often steals peace of mind, citing another young vendor who accepted dirty money and vanished, leaving her family broken. She gently reminds Aïcha that money can either save a life or drown it completely.





Over the next few days, conflict weighs heavily on Aïcha's mind as she navigates her daily duties amidst crowded market alleys. She envisions her brother's frayed schoolbooks alongside Mr. Koffi's alluring promises, agonizing over whether to accept the illicit offer or stay true to her values. Every transaction becomes a quiet battle raging within her soul.





When Mr. Koffi returns to the market expecting an eager agreement, Aïcha stands before her vibrant stack of folded pagnes. She looks around at the honest market women working tirelessly around her and remembers the enduring pride in her father's voice. The temptation that once clouded her judgment suddenly fades under the bright light of her true principles.





With unwavering composure, Aïcha looks Mr. Koffi in the eye and firmly turns down his dishonest offer. She asserts that her integrity and her family's honor are not for sale at any price. Surprised and disappointed, Mr. Koffi turns and disappears into the bustling crowd without another word.





Aïcha breathes a deep sigh of relief as the warm sun illuminates her humble market stall. Though her financial struggles remain, she carries her head high, knowing her conscience is clean and her family's name remains unblemished. Bound by faith and dignity, she wraps her father's black pagne around her shoulders, ready to face the future with strength.