

## WRITING SAMPLE

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**Sahara**

It's either the northern raven or the girl. In the case of the raven, he is resting his hands on the balcony railing and looking down Avenue 6 Drive when the passerine bird, large-bodied, long graduated tail, huge black bill, all-dark, not the white-necked pied crow known in these regions, flies by and perches on the balcony, barely a meter away. Their eyes lock in a staring contest that appears to last forever. It has brown irises.

After a while, the ancient bird takes off, croaking as it soars away in the air, until it disappears behind the metallic edifice in front.

In the case of the girl, and her case is commonplace, an aero-bus slowly docks at the Mandala terminal in Blantyre, and he looks at his clock; the square monitor embedded in his left palm reads 11:40am. It's always 11:40am.

He is sitting on the chair in the glassy waiting booth, undecided. The passengers scamper out of the locomotive like rats smoked out of their hole as soon as the doors slide open. He rises and walks towards the bus. He gets in through the front door and presses his palm on the Zooter for identification. There is a green light blinking on the driver's console and the android driver nods for him to get in. He turns towards the isle and notices the bus is empty except for this one seat, occupied by a passenger who is looking down, her black dreadlocks shielding her face as they flow all about her.

She raises her head and their eyes meet. Time stops. There is no sound that he hears except the thumping of his heart. Black glistening dreadlocks flowing about her like river water, enveloping an oval face where eyes as shiny as stars, a turned up nose and thick lips, have made their home.

Next, he is sitting with her on the chair and he doesn't know how that has happened. She is on his right, sitting on the window seat. She turns and speaks to him:

"What'chu sitting here for?" Her accent is Southern.

"Eee, you said what?"

"Many vacant seats, what'chu sitting here for?" she gestures with her hand.

His eyes track her hand as it quickly swipes around like a surveillance camcorder, showing him all the empty seats. He stands up to walk away from her, find another seat, dunderhead! But she holds his hand and forcefully pulls him down. He collapses back into the chair, excited with the prospect but also wondering where a girl that pretty got all that energy.

"You sit now bwana. Only joking, don't like jokes? I am Sahara."

"Sahara like..."

“Like the desert,” she takes the words out of his mouth.

“Pleased to meet you, I am..”

“Kamoto, I know you bwana. Pleased to meet you too.”

He freezes, looking at her with awe. How did she know his name? He wonders.

“Look at the floor sir, you dropped your mandible.” she says. “It’s the badge on your shirt, it gave you away.”

Dunderhead! She is gazing at him like an artist admiring the finishing of his masterpiece. She is smiling at him; that kind of smile a teacher displays when proving to his class the math wasn’t really as hard as they thought. Red dress, pink nails, golden earrings, a glassy necklace that sparkles. He smiles back at her.

“This is me,” she says as she presses the red button on the sides. “Do you see that green house, behind those trees? That’s where I live.” She is standing and ready to go. “Sahara Chaponda, I work at the Great Shopping Mall as a manager. I am human.” She is smiling again.

She takes something out of her brown handbag which he notices for the first time.

“Here,” An e-business card. Her name flashes and goes on the top of the card. In the picture box, her face beams and disappears, to be replaced by a different one, this time she smiles and the next she frowns, yet another she remains expressionless and so on and so forth. Her contact details are at the bottom.

The bus has docked and she is already at the door.

It’s always like that, all the time. He has lost count but this is the third month he’s been seeing her and the dream always ends here. She gives him her business card and she vanishes.

His psychiatrist says there is no such a thing as paranormal in the multiverse. That belief belongs to the old world, when people believed in UFOs and witchcraft. Humanity can no longer afford a room for unidentified things. We live in a world where to not identify a thing is to put the whole humanity in danger.

“So, these are just dreams?”

“Yes, they are just dreams.”

“But why are they recurring?”

“The only explanation I have is that these are symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It is not a problem at all. You are trying to deal with your imprisonment issue.”

“But that issue is resolved, after all I only stayed in prison for ten days.”

“Yes, but how do you feel about the government? Do you harbour feelings of resentment towards the government? It’s all connected Mr Kamoto.”

“Don’t you think these dreams are pointing to something?”

“No Mister, Don’t even go there. That’s superstition and it has no room in this world.”

“*Zoona*. You know the reason they’d arrested me for, isn’t it?”

“They said you were disrupting public order.”

“There was a line in my news article that said, *information from a reliable government agent confirms that there is no hope of finding a cure for the disease in the next ten years.*”

“That would bring fear and panic to the public isn’t it?”

“*Zoona*. But look, does this not confirm that there are some things we have no answers for?”

“In the case of the disease, we have a whole lot of information on it; we know what causes it, the part of the body it attacks, how to avoid it, and many other things, what we don’t have is a once off cure, that’s all.”

“What do I do then?”

“The dreams will go, slowly, they will go. Once you are back on your feet and you have forgotten all about the incident, it will go.”

“Thank you.”

But today he wakes up with a different feeling. He wants to pursue his dream, like literary, see what happens, there is nothing to lose if it turns out he’s been chasing after a hologram.

He knows what his psychiatrist will say, so he doesn’t call. He calls his work place instead, telling the chief editor he is pursuing a story in Blantyre.

He doesn’t realize but the time is eight in the morning. Lilongwe is already awake and bustling; the humming of aero-engines, the honking of vehicles below – He is on the last floor – an ambulance siren in the distance, and the wind whispering by his window. The sky is a huge blue when he parts the drapes; it stretches as far away as his eyes can afford to see. There is a bird high up on the far west, playing freely.

It takes two hours to drive a Gravity Mobile on the Gravity D-road from Lilongwe to Blantyre. He will make it, he tells himself. The plan is as clear as rainy water in his mind. By four in the evening he will be home, making himself a sandwich and tea, and watching history on the Telecommunication Curtain.

It is 10:53 when he gets to Blantyre, his old city. He worked here twenty years ago when his career was just beginning, before the trophies had clattered his table, before the jealousy from workmates had crept it, before the responsibilities and promotions had come flooding by, and before the transfer to the headquarters in Lilongwe.

From afar, the city of Blantyre looks like many pencils of different sizes protruding from the ground with mushroom shaped objects interspaced in the air between them. The words on the entrance arch; the one you find soon after crossing the seventeen kilometres of the artificial lake that surrounds the city reads, WELCOME TO BLANTYRE A CITY BUILT ON IDEAS. And the ideas are the many gravity domes that shield the light from the sun all the time. The ideas are

the fact that you can't drive your car in the ground streets as they get crammed all the time forcing people to pay a lot of money to the government so they can fly their Gravity Mobiles. The ideas are that Blantyre is a city feeding on hydro energy and solar power.

He parks his Gra-Mob on the 10th floor of a parking Carnivore, and waits on the extended balcony for an aero-motor-scooter.

It is 11:35 when he dismounts from the scooter at the Mandala terminal. He goes into the glassy booth to wait for the bus. The monitor above his head confirms that the next bus will dock at 11:40. He doesn't want to get excited.

*There is no such a thing as paranormal in the multiverse.*

When the bus docks, he does not wait for the passengers to come out before he leaves the booth, and the passengers who come out are less than the number of fingers on one hand. It is also a human who is driving not a humanoid and the bus is half full. Men in uniform, obviously going for afternoon shifts, a gentleman in a black suit, two women, one in red hair and the other in golden braids, at the very back; these two are the only women in the whole bus. They are absorbed in a conversation. His eyes rest on them for a brief moment, but none of them looks like his dream girl. He can hear faint echoes of laughter from the red and the golden hair at the back, the two women unable to conceal their mirth. He finds a seat. The bus takes off.

*There is no such a thing as paranormal in the multiverse.*

He thinks as he exists at the next terminal. He should have trusted his psychiatrist.

"Mr Kamoto, you should trust me."

"Yes doctor."

"How old are you?"

"Forty five."

"Oh, you are so young."

"I am not."

"You are, how old do you think I am?"

"Sixty?"

"No, Mr Kamoto, I am a hundred and twelve. Don't get shocked. It's all about being healthy, healthy foods, healthy choices and a lot of discipline."

"Yes."

"Humanity has all it needs to live longer, so if you are wondering, no I am not a clone." Laughter. "This is my fifty sixth year working as a psychiatrist. You should believe me. You know what these things we call dreams are?"

"No."

“Just a window into our unconscious. It’s our own thoughts, our own fears, embedded unto the subconscious and manifesting themselves in the form of images and sounds when we sleep. Dreams can be your happy moments but they can also be your worst nightmares which you push away during your conscience zones.”

“And we have no control over them?”

“No. No control at all Mr Kamoto.”

“I’ve been reading.”

“Okay, you have been reading.”

“That there are actually some inventions that were inspired by dreams?”

“The Periodic table, Dimitri Mendeleev, many centuries ago, just like James Watson’s DNA’s double helix spiral form and the modern idea of Free Space. I know all that. And all this confirms that dreams are our thoughts locked in the subconscious.”

“How about premonition dreams, where people dream of events that will occur in the future”

“Coincidence.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Mr Kamoto.”

The frustration must have numbed his brains for he forgets to refuel his Gra-Mob as he leaves Blantyre and only sees the blinking light when he’s driven for an hour. The screen on the console says he should refuel here and now. He is at Ntchewu, a town renowned for its cheap housewares.

He stops the Gra-Mob at a pump and presses a button below his chair to let the fuel attendant android in the cubical structure in front know he is here. The doors to the cubical opens and a female android walks towards him. He is fumbling with the button that opens the lid on the tank and he does not see the gynoid approach.

When he raises his head to command the gynoid, he is filled with shock. He stays for a moment, transfixed and looking at the machine like he is witnessing the sinking of Atlantis.

Black glistening dreadlocks, shiny eyes, a turned up nose and thick lips, structures that make a perfect human face. Red dress, pink nails, golden earrings, a glassy necklace that sparkles. Sahara!

The gynoid extends her hand, showing him the screen in her palm. He turns to place his palm on hers so their palm clocks can touch; a routine task for identification.

“Mr Kamoto,” he almost jumps out of his chair as the gynoid begins to speak. “How much should we deduct from your account?” the gynoid is smiling. It is a perfect smile.

“Fill it up please,” he stumbles over his words.

When the gynoid is done she comes close to his window.

“I have something for you,” she leans closer.

Is he imagining things?

“Please don’t get startled. Behave normal. I have something for you.”

“What do you have for me?”

He looks into her eyes wondering if he is really talking with a gynoid.

“My master wants you to have something.”

“Who is your master?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

The name on her shirt reads, SAHARA. Sahara’s head turns around, 360 degrees.

“There is no one in proximity. Please act normal.”

She extends her hand into the car. The arm parts in the middle and the two sections partially flip outwards to reveal a metal cylinder standing in the centre of the arm. There is a tiny card on the top of the cylinder. It is black.

“Please take the black device. It is a memory card. It has information for you.”

He is not thinking. He takes the card quickly and keeps it in his hand.

“Thank you sir, it was good doing business with you,” the final line from every fuel attendant android.

He is still looking at her as she walks back to the cubical with a perfect human body and movement.

What just happened?

*There is no such a thing as paranormal in the multiverse?*

His apartment is on the eighteenth floor on Avenue 6 Drive. After parking his Mob in the parking hallway below, he takes an elevator to the last floor where his two-roomed flat is.

He feels his pocket to see if he still has the device.

He has a lot of questions like, was the device given to him because it was him or was it meant for anybody? And how come the gynoid was his dream? He chooses not to ponder over the questions. His more-than-a-decade experience in journalism has taught him that there is more to life than the database can tell. People keep secrets and they want the secrets known, part of the reason he was imprisoned.

He has learnt to conceal his sources and to play the authority; that's why people trust him. He told them at the police station, "If I tell you my sources, you will be forced to relieve half of your officers including two who are part of this interrogation."

"Why?"

"Because they are some of my sources," he wasn't lying. They never made further enquiries and released him after the ten recommended days.

He sits on the couch in his house. Takes out the device from his pocket, holds it up against the light of the sun from the window. The device has words written on it; SDXC, 164GB. He knows it's an old electronic data storage card. The Telecommunication Curtain –TC – uses it as a symbol for the save button. Or could the TC have a slot where he can insert it?

He takes the remote on the coffee table in front, presses a button that unrolls the TC. The monitor, which hangs on the wall like the old scrolls, unwraps. He rises from the chair to check the plastic bar at the bottom of the TC if it has a port for the SDXC card. It doesn't have.

He also knows that his pad in his room, as well as the audio side drawers on his bed do not have the kind of port.

He switches on the TC with his remote. There is a blue line that cuts through the middle of the TC horizontally; the blue line grows, spreading with speed on both sides, to fill the whole monitor with a sky blue colour. On his remote he presses the keyboard symbol and the coffee table in front is illuminated; a neon keyboard forms on the glass of the table.

He puts both hands on the keyboard and types, Free Space. There is a secular logo on the top right corner of the screen with the letters FS on it, Free Space but also standing for Fast Search.

An empty rectangular box blinks below the logo. He types the word, SDXC card in the blinking box. Pictures of cards, similar to the one in his possession come. At the bottom there is a small write-up.

*SDXC cards are storage devices in the family of SD cards developed in the 21st century. SD; Secure Digital and SDXC Secure Digital extended Capacity can only work on old machines like computers, tablets and cameras from the 21st century. Their use is considered archaic and extinct but...Expand Space to read on?*

No, there is no need to expand space to read on, he tells himself. He remembers an antique item that he received as a trophy for his feature; *has science failed us all?* Published in the Daily Chronicles, a paper he works for. He is sure it was a computer.

When he finds it, stacked in the pile of books, cartons, old clothes, and other cast-offs he does not struggle to switch it on and to find a slot for the card. The keyboard and pad are the same as those on the TC.

*Open file?*

Click

*Play video?*

Click

Windows Media Player. Loading. 45% 60% 87% 92% 100%

Words form on the black screen; words in white.

*This information is meant for you Thokozani Kamoto. Please destroy the card after watching.*

The words disappear and are replaced by a picture of a man seated on a chair. He is putting on a white shirt, and dark blue trousers. He looks young; tiny ears, eyes that bulge a little, a flat nose, puffy cheeks, dark brown complexion. His eyes are red and tired.

Kamoto doesn't believe it. He knows the man in the picture. The imprisoned scientist, Kalaile, fondly referred to as "the mad scientist," in the papers. They say he deliberately built androids that were packed with anti-government data, whatever that means.

*Sorry to put you in such trouble. But it's all connected. Starting with the antique computer you are using, which is a trophy from our association. The award was suggested by me and I had you in mind for the prize. The dreams, Sahara, the raven, it's all connected. Nothing mystical. As they say, There is nothing paranormal in the multiverse.*

*Let's start with your dreams. it's really technical. But here is the short of it. I found your database on Free Space. I connected your Artificial Intelligence chip in your brain, which connects to your palm clock, with that of Sahara, a female android I built. The dreams were enhanced by a process, including that of the raven. The raven has lived with humans for as long as we have existed, owing its survival to the unselective eating habits. I called this project, Project Raven. It is a project for the survival of humanity. I hope that makes sense to you.*

*But there is more a scientist can do than to just build androids, isn't it? Which brings us to our subject...*

*The disease is curable. I have found a cure. I reported this to the council three years ago, and they told me in my face that they were not interested in any antidote. Our job is to build humanoid, that's all.*

*What will happen to all the funding we get from the World Council? What will happen to the millions who work in the departments? They asked.*

*I want you to write and tell the world that there is a cure. I had to use this antique device because you never know who is monitoring you with all these gadgets at our disposal. Here is the formula which you must publish. You and I can save the world. I know we can.*

The computer screen goes blank. Words and symbols appear. Before he reads and make sense of the words and symbols, he sees a green telephone icon blinking on the TC. He folds the computer and hides it under the coffee table. He presses a button on the remote that answers the call. A face appears. A woman in a yellow top and green hair. Oval face with a pointed chin. Thick lips and a long nose. Small but wide eyes. Her eyelids look artificial; long and visible.

"Mr Kamoto."

“Doctor.”

“How have you been?”

“Fine, I am fine.”

“I was expecting you today.”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“I had an emergency trip to Blantyre. Following a story.”

“I see. How are the dreams? Any improvements?”

“I think I am feeling better now.”

“Good. I will be expecting you on Monday. Is that fine with you?”

“Yes, doctor, it is fine.”

“Later then.”

“Later doctor.”

When the face of his psychiatrist disappears on the TC, he sighs, collapse his arms on his sides, recline his head backwards with his eyes closed before returning to his computer.