
Samuel Benchetrit

A Heart Outside

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BIOGRAPHY Samuel Benchetrit, who was born in 1973, is a writer, actor and director (*J'ai toujours rêvé d'être un gangster* [I always dreamed of becoming a gangster], 2008; *Janis et John*, 2003) as well as a playwright (*Moins deux* [Minus Two], 2005; *Comédie sur un quai de gare* [Play on a station platform], 2001).

PUBLICATIONS Published by Julliard: *Chroniques de l'Asphalte* [The Asphalt Chronicles], volumes I and II, 2005 and 2007 (republished by Pocket, 2007 and 2008); *Récit d'un branleur* [Story of a Lazy Swine], 2000 (republished by Pocket, 2004).



This novel tells the story of Charly Traoré, an adorable ten-year-old black kid, originally from Mali, who lives in one of Paris's outer city housing estates, consisting of two tower blocks, the Tour Rimbaud and the Tour Simone de Beauvoir. His whole world revolves around his gang and his girlfriend, Mélanie, his older brother the drug addict, but especially his mother—who has been 'nicked' by the police at the start of the story because her papers were not in order. For a whole day, hour after hour, Charly wanders through the housing estates, looking for his brother, Henry. He meets some great people, rubs up against a few gang members, plays a game of football, plays truant, daydreams, follows his crazy associations of ideas, his grown-up-child digressions, while

endlessly waiting for his gentle, affectionate mother ...

Le Cœur en dehors, has a language, a style, an innocent vision of the world. It is Charly's voice, it is he who is speaking, thinking, watching—and it's hard not to be reminded of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. That's because little Charly is so likeable and the way he looks at his sordid 'banlieue' is filled with witticisms and wonderment in every line. At the start of the book, he thinks that Rimbaud is just the name of a tower block. At the end of the novel, he will discover that Rimbaud was a famous poet who said things that seem to be true and relevant to Charly. His dawn-to-dusk Odyssey is an unforgettable one.

Chapter II

8 a.m.

I'm off to school at eight in the morning. Classes start at eight-thirty, but I need half an hour just to get through the estate. Winter and summer. It might snow and everything, so I need to leave at eight and I can manage to sneak through the estate like a miserable frozen creep. So, this morning, at about eight I found myself in the lift. What's so amazing is that this thing is only working once in a thousand years. But when it's actually operating, you feel like you've won the lottery.

When the doors opened, I almost fell into the arms of a bunch of cops. There were three of them. And some old bag was with them. One of those tight-arsed types. She reminded me of Mrs Boulin, my head teacher. She was the spitting image of her, in fact. I don't know if you've ever noticed, but when you meet two people who look really alike, they get muddled up in your head and you have a hell of a job remembering which is which. The cops and the woman looked right out of their depth and you could feel they didn't feel at home in this building.

The old cow bent towards me, wearing one of those stomach-churning expressions.

She asked:

— Do you know where Joséphine and Henry Traoré live?

— Er, on the sixth floor.

And without so much as a thank-you, they barely let me get out of the lift

before they grabbed it and went up in it themselves. I swear it made my blood run cold. It wasn't so much that the cops were asking me; for my own address—that was weird enough. But I'm used to it, cos of my brother Henry who spends his life getting into trouble. No. It was that old bag being there. And the way she used the name "Joséphine". That's my Mum. Usually, they're just looking for Henry, that's all. They take him round the nick and my Mum has to go down there and beg them to let him go, and everything. That's the routine, and most of the mums of addicts know the way to the nick by heart, with its horrible interview rooms. When I was too young to stay at home alone, I went down the nick a couple of times with my mum. What a drag! It made me feel sick to see my Mum go down on her knees to beg them to let Henry go. After, she'd take us to get something to eat in the caff at the shopping centre and she seemed pleased that they were together again. Personally, I punched Henry a few times to get him to stop messing about. But my Mum is always happy to get him back.

I heard the question over again in my head:

— Do you know where Joséphine and Henry Traoré live?

The lift doors closed. So I decided to go back up to see what was going on. I took the stairs, something I'm used to doing. When the lift has broken down. Or racing against my pal Jimmy Sanchez who lives on the fourth floor. I'm a cool sprinter, you know, and when I'm at my best I can get there quicker than the lift. My record is the seventh floor. I swear, you need to be a terrific runner to get to the seventh floor before the lift, and Jimmy Sanchez can tell you how good I am. But this time, even though I took the stairs four at a time, I still got there afterwards. That's because it was eight o'clock, and I'm not at my best in the mornings. I opened the door onto the landing and I saw my Mum standing in front of the cops and the old bag. My Mum was already dressed, wearing make-up and everything. She must have been getting ready to go to work at the Rolands' place. She usually leaves at ten past eight so she can catch the bus at twenty past. Mum always has to put on make-up. It suits her ok, and she doesn't overdo it, but I'd really hate to have to have to plaster stuff all over my face every morning of my life. Women are funny creatures. The old bag was wearing quite a lot of make-up too, and I was thinking how Mum and her had to get up earlier in the morning to slap all that stuff on their mugs, and that now they would be facing up to each other in their make-up. The old cow took a piece of paper out of her handbag and read it out to Mum. I couldn't hear anything, but it didn't look too clever. Mum seemed far from happy but she wasn't staring the old bag in the face, she was looking at the piece of paper. The old bag said something then and Mum looked up. When she did, I got the feeling she was crying. Then there was one of those pauses. Mum went inside and the cops and the old bag followed her. They didn't slam the door behind them, so I thought they'd be out again quickly. I decided to wait, and realised that my heart was beating really fast. It's something that happens to me sometimes.

If you saw me, you'd think I was completely cool-headed and all that. But to tell the truth, I can get all worked up over nothing. I may seem calm and sure of myself, but it's all a front. And I know most guys are the same.

You need to show that you don't care about anything to survive.

The cops came out again with the old bint and Mum behind them. She still looked a bit strange, she was wearing her coat and carrying a sort of sports bag. I can't remember where the bag came from but I think it belonged to Henry from the time he was into athletics. His thing was sprinting. You ought to have seen him, he was off like a rocket. Even I looked like an old banger, running beside him. But the drugs slowed him down a lot, if you get my drift. Anyway, Mum was carrying the bag and it looked as if it was full to bursting. She closed the door and the cops called the lift. It was funny seeing Mum with those people. I don't know to explain it, there was something not quite right about it. Mum looked straight ahead of her, as if nothing special was happening. She has a gift for doing that. She could have worked at the town hall or got into politics or something. But when you know her as well as I do, you can see when she's upset or whatever. And while she was waiting for the lift she might have looked as if nothing special was happening, but I could see she was very upset about something.

What happened then was that she suddenly turned her head in my direction. And she found herself looking straight at me. My heart was in my mouth. It was funny, that, because my Mum has looked at me a thousand times. In fact, I feel that she looks at me all the time. Sometimes when we're sitting watching the TV I get the feeling that Mum is watching me. And even if it's a wicked programme, she's still looking at me. I was slightly worried that she had seen me lurking behind the door to the stairwell. Not because I should have been on my way to school but because I really looked like I was up to no good, hiding like that. And then, I know my Mum can read fear in me. I can put on a show like the best of them, and pretend that everything's going great, but if something's upset me, she can see it immediately.

And because I was annoyed that she'd seen me, I smiled at her. A big grin. I must have looked pretty silly. With a worried expression like I sort of didn't understand what was happening, and on top of it a huge grin as if I'd come top of the class. Sometimes, you can make some pretty funny faces. Especially if you're out of your depth. But then, smiling just isn't me. There are guys who wear a permanent grin on their gobs. I can't stand that kind of guy. Like that kid, Anthony Meltrani, who's always grinning like the village idiot. If you meet him in the street, he'll be wearing a big grin on his face. If he starts to cry, the dickhead still smiles. During a stop-and-search, the dickhead smiles. I bet that even at night, when he's asleep, he still wears a huge grin on his ugly mug. I mean, it's depressing.

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A Heart Outside

My Mum watched me for a few seconds with that silly grin on my face, and then she did something absolutely weird. If it hadn't been her, I'd have thought she was a monster. She turned her head away. Just like that. Not a wink, nothing.

She just turned her head. As if I wasn't there. And what's more, the lift suddenly arrived. They got inside and I heard the doors closing and the sound that meant that it was going down to the entrance.

Talk about a shock.

And my heart continued to beat like mad. I don't know if you've noticed but it's always at the most unexpected moments that the craziest stuff happens. There you are, peacefully on your way to school, and a gang of cops with an old bag who is the spitting image of your head teacher come calling on your Mum, without you having the slightest idea why. Sometimes, I'd like to have a rubber hanging over my head so I could erase everything and start the day all over again.

I decided to go back home. Ever since the start of the year, I'd had my own bunch of keys and my Mum had gone on and on at me, telling me how much she trusted me and all that. Actually, she had no choice because as soon as I started going to the big school I often got home before her in the afternoon.

My hand was trembling like an old man's, and I couldn't get the key into the lock. But when I finally managed it, I realised it wasn't locked at all. Maybe Mum had done it on purpose, in case me or Henry had forgotten our keys. Or perhaps it was only because she'd forgotten to lock up. When I opened the door I got the funny feeling that I was sneaking in like a burglar. It must have been the fact of seeing the filth just a moment ago, and also because I was supposed to be at school.

I crossed the living room to go and look out of the window overlooking the entrance to the building. I didn't open the window wide, but just opened it a bit and stuck my head against the pane. My Mum had come out of the tower block with the cops and the old bag. There was no one else around, which is often the case at that time of day. Some people have gone to work and the rest are still asleep. I knew it was better that no one was around, Mum certainly wouldn't have liked being seen with those guys. They walked over to the pavement where a police van was parked. One of the cops opened the sliding door at the back and signalled to Mum to get in. The old bag also got in the back, next to my Mum, with the coppers in front.

When the van drove away, I tried to see my Mum through the window, but I couldn't.

It felt as if I might never see her again.