Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Snow Kimono

Written by Mark Henshaw

Published by Tinder Press

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The SNOW KIMONO

mark henshaw



TINDER
PRESS

Copyright © 2014 Mark Henshaw

The right of Mark Henshaw to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published by The Text Publishing Company, Australia

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by
Tinder Press
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

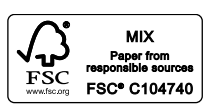
All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 2569 6

Offset in Guardi by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in well-managed forests and other controlled sources. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.tinderpress.co.uk
www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Chapter 1

THERE are times in your life when something happens after which you're never the same. It may be something direct or indirect, or something someone says to you. But whatever it is, there is no going back. And inevitably, when it happens, it happens suddenly, without warning.

❀

Paris: July 1989

When Auguste Jovert stepped out of his apartment building on rue St Antoine to get his evening paper, it was dusk. The streetlamps were lit. Rain still fell in a thin mist. The roads shone. To anybody else it would have been obvious—accidents hovered like hawks in the air.

As he made his way along the wet pavement, in his coat, his umbrella unfurled above his head, he was thinking about a letter

he had received that day. It was from a young woman, someone he had never met before, who had made an extraordinary claim. She claimed she was his daughter.

He had stood that morning in the cool, empty foyer of his apartment building reading and re-reading the letter. He did not at first see the small photograph caught in the corner of the envelope. When he did, he raised it to his face. One look into the young woman's eyes and he knew that it was true.

For thirty years, Jovert had worked as an Inspector of Police. Before that, he worked for the French Territorial Police in Algiers. Recently he had retired, and ever since then he had had the strangest feeling, the feeling that he was lost. While he worked, he barely had time to think. Things kept at bay. Now, however, fragments from his past had begun to replay themselves in his head. It was as if, now that he was approaching the end of his life, the overall pattern of his existence was about to be revealed to him. But the moment of revelation never came. Instead, he began to have doubts, to wake up at night. What's more, he constantly had the impression that something was about to happen. Then something did happen. The letter arrived.



It seemed to him later, recalling the accident, that at one moment he had been thinking about the letter, and the next he was lying flat on his back in the gutter looking up at the intricate

expanse of the underside of a car. He could feel the heat from the engine on his face and hear the tiny tinking sounds of its cooling pipes. Odd drops of water fell about him and onto his forehead. One wheel of the car rested on the pavement above his head.

In the distance, he could hear the urgent rise and fall of a siren. He turned his head tentatively to his right. There, suspended beneath the rim of the car, was a man's face. He was wearing glasses. His upturned hat lay on the roadway beside him.

The man was kneeling down, staring at him. Jovert saw now that he was bald, that his perfectly burnished head was studded with thousands of tiny, incandescent hemispheres of light. He looked from one tiny dazzling world to the next. He saw the man's mouth moving. The tip of his tie rested on the wet roadway. A dark circle had begun to form about his knee. Jovert had wanted to tell him. Then a peculiar thing happened. All the lights went out.

❀

Two days later, Jovert left his apartment once again to get his evening paper. This time on crutches. Six weeks, the doctor had said. He had held the X-rays of Jovert's knee up to the hospital window. Maybe more, he said.

On his way home, Jovert sat down on the bench opposite St Paul's to rest. He took the envelope he had received earlier that week out of his coat pocket, read the address.

Inspector A. Jovert
Le Commissariat de Police
36 Quai des Orfèvres
75001 PARIS, FRANCE

He looked at the stamp, brought it up close to his face. Only now did he see that it had been franked some months before.

He took the letter out and read it through once again. She did not know whether he was still alive, she said. She had only recently discovered that he was her father. She wanted him to know that she existed. She did not say why. I make no demands on you, she wrote. But then, at the end: *Perhaps, if you wanted, you could write to me*. And she gave him a name, an address—Mathilde Soukhane, 10 rue Duhamel, Algiers.

He took the photograph out of the envelope. He recalled the day almost thirty years before when he had seen her mother for the first time. It had been in Sétif, in a narrow side street. He had been walking up the chipped stone stairs. She had emerged suddenly, like an apparition, from an unseen door in the wall, her dress so white, so dazzling in the light that it was like some momentary disturbance in the air itself.

Even after all these years, the image of her face, her skin, dark against her blazing dress, still lingered. He remembered she had been carrying a bundle of papers in her arms. When he turned to look after her, she was gone.

The girl in the photograph had the same face, the same eyes. She had the same dark skin.

He sat for a long time thinking.

Then, all at once, as though he had only just made up his mind, he took the photograph, and the letter, and crushed them into a tight ball in his hand. He rose, threw the wad of paper into the bin beside the bench, and walked off.

It's too late, he said to himself. It's too late.

That evening, however, things began to change. Afterwards, months later, the letter, the accident, came to seem to him precursors of an even greater shift in his life, one that had been lying in wait for him for years.

❀

When he arrived back at his apartment building, he punched his code into the panel by the door, listened for the click. His building was old. The door was heavy, its thick black paint cracked. He had to push with his shoulder to get it open. The hospital staff had been right. His crutches *were* too short.

Inside, in the foyer, the lift was out of order once again. He stood looking at the note taped to its wire cage. It was the third time this month. He pushed in the light switch beside the stairwell. He would have three minutes to climb the five flights of stairs to his apartment before the light went out. Reluctantly he began to climb.

By the time he heaved himself up over the last step to his landing, his right leg had begun to ache. Then, as he took his keys from his pocket, they slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor.

Jesus, Mother of God, he said under his breath.

A door closed beneath him. He heard footsteps receding down the hallway. He thought of calling out, but it was already too late. Whoever it was had begun descending the stairs. He leaned against the wall, looked up at the globe glowing dimly above his head. Its shade—dusty, discoloured, suspended on a length of twisted cord—was oscillating minutely. He pictured the tiny convected eddies whirling at its rim. He could see the movement of its shadow on the wall opposite. Any moment now, he knew, the light would go out. He waited, counting the seconds, until it did.

He closed his eyes.

Standing like this in the darkened hallway, he could hear the thinning evening traffic, the muffled subterranean rumble of the Metro, the sound of a distant siren. He thought of his own accident, took a deep breath. The air smelt musty now.

Beneath his door a thin fissure of light hovered in the darkness. In it he could just see his fallen keys. He prodded them with the end of one of his crutches. Then he heard a rustle at the far end of the corridor and, suddenly, a voice.

May I help you, Inspector?

The sound startled him. It seemed to come out of nowhere.

The light switch, he said. I've dropped my keys.

Instantly the light came on. It flared up around him for a moment before dying down. He stood there blinking. He could just make out the shape of someone standing in the shadows at the top of the stairs.

Permit me, Inspector, the stranger said, coming forward. He stooped to pick up the keys. As he raised his head, light fell across his face and Jovert registered for the first time that his saviour was Oriental—from China, or Japan.

He could see him clearly now—an impeccably dressed, sharp-featured little man in his fifties. A pair of wire-rimmed spectacles poked out from the top of his coat pocket. In his hands, he held a hat. There was something about him that reminded Jovert of the Emperor Hirohito.

Thank you, Jovert said.

You're welcome, Inspector. I have been waiting for you.

Waiting? he said.

Yes. Permit me to introduce myself. I am Omura. Tadashi Omura, former Professor of Law at the Imperial University of Japan. And you are Inspector Jovaire, are you not?

With this he bowed slightly. It had been like an announcement.

Now I am here, he said.

Jovert half-expected Omura to go on, but instead, he stood there silently, with Jovert's keys still in his hand.

Jovert, he said. Auguste Jovert.

He felt compelled to bow himself, but instantly he realised how impossible that would have been. Instead, he turned awkwardly on his crutches to face Omura, inclined his head.

Your keys, Omura said.

Yes, thank you.

Omura, however, made no attempt to leave. As they stood there in the empty hallway, Jovert began to feel increasingly under

some obligation to this odd little man who had helped him, and who was still standing, expectantly it now seemed, in front of him.

He unlocked his door and pushed it open with his elbow. As he did so, Omura leaned forward. He stood, half-stooped for a moment, surveying the room. Then he straightened. Looked up at Jovert. Smiled.

Yes, he said.

The two men stood there on the threshold for a moment.

Would you like to come in, Jovert said.

Yes, yes, Omura replied. I have been waiting. Please.

And with this, he stretched out his arm, inviting Jovert to precede him, as if, in fact, the apartment belonged to him.

Later, when Jovert tried to recall what had taken place between this moment and the next, he could not. One instant, it seemed to him, he was standing in the open doorway to his apartment, leaning on his crutches, and the next he was sitting opposite his lounge-room window listening to Tadashi Omura's strangely mesmerising voice.

One afternoon, Omura was saying, I decided to take Fumiko to see her mother's grave. Fumiko must have been about three at the time. It was the middle of winter and there was still snow in the streets. I remember the sky being a uniform, dull white, which meant it would snow again later in the afternoon.

We must have spent some time getting ready. Going to

the cemetery was no easy matter. Katsuo had wanted Sachiko buried in the old cemetery outside of Osaka. We had to take the bus, then the train. Not that this was a problem. We lived on the outskirts of Osaka, in any case. But afterwards we would have to walk the one or two kilometres through the woods. I myself loved this walk, even in winter. Often I would be the only person on the path. I loved the absolute stillness, the sound of my own footfall on the fresh snow, the feeling of my fogged breath on my face. Sometimes one would see a fox, or an owl perched on a tree limb. There was a stone bridge across the stream which led up to the temple gates, and I used to look forward to the odd hollow echo of my boots on it as I crossed. A short distance away, downstream, was a pond which froze over in winter. From the bridge you could see the children who came there sometimes to skate.

I had never taken Fumiko to the cemetery before. My housekeeper, Mrs Muramoto, had called at the last minute to say that she was ill, that she could not come to take care of Fumiko after all. I remember I suspected her of lying, and later I found out she had gone to visit relatives in Nara. I remember being angry. She knew I was depending on her, that I could not leave Fumiko alone in the apartment. I already had my coat and gloves on, and I could tell immediately by the tone of her voice that she was lying.

Then I remember standing on the steps outside our apartment building, with Fumiko beside me, all dressed up in her coat and fur hat.

It's like yesterday, he said. I can still feel her child's gloved hands in mine. Fumiko wanted to know where we were going. She was turning from side to side, waiting. I knew she was excited because she was humming to herself.

Omura stopped for a moment. Took out a packet of cigarettes, shook one loose.

But I am not explaining myself well, he said. And there is something I have forgotten to tell you. You see, Fumiko was not my daughter. In fact, I have never been married. First there were my studies, then establishing my legal practice. I never seemed to find the time. How I came to have Fumiko is rather complicated. I will get to that. At the time I am talking about, Fumiko had been with me for about a year. In general, Mrs Muramoto looked after her. Already, however, I had begun looking towards the future, when things, explanations, would be difficult. As a consequence, I had decided, at least for the time being, to bring Fumiko up believing that she was my own daughter. In other words, that I was her father.

As you can imagine, Fumiko had been talking for some time, and yet, despite all of my and Mrs Muramoto's encouragement, she had never once called me Father. I cannot tell you how important this had become for me. At the time, it seemed as if the whole future of our lives together depended on Fumiko uttering this one word. Without this, the world I had decided to build for her would never, could never, exist.

Omura fell silent again. He leaned forward, flicked the end of his cigarette into the small bowl on the table in front

of him. He raised the cigarette to his lips, inhaled.

Where was I, he said.

Standing on the doorstep outside your apartment, Jovert replied.

Yes, yes, he said. You see, I was still not used to going out with Fumiko on my own. A three-year-old child. What if something happened? I wasn't even sure if she was properly dressed. I remember looking down at my watch. It was already almost two. It was so still. I knew it was going to snow again. Not heavily. There was no danger. Nothing like that. It's just that I didn't know whether to take Fumiko or not. Usually there was Mrs Muramoto with us when we went out, or someone else.

I knelt down to look at Fumiko.

So, Fumiko, I said, shall we go?

Why not? she said, shrugging her shoulders and smiling.

I stayed there, half-kneeling, looking at her. I remember how sweet she looked in her coat and hat.

Are you warm enough?

She nodded.

Sure?

Sure, she said.

She had never been on a train before. It was all new to her. We sat in the warmth of the station waiting room. Fumiko sat next to me, her stockinged legs dangling over the edge of the seat. I had never realised how curious children are. It's odd, I think it was only then that I began to realise how being the head of a law firm had cut me off from…well, from everything, from

the world around me. From life. Here I was, I must have been forty or forty-one at the time and, all at once, it seemed to me that I knew nothing about the world, nothing.

Suddenly, I was glad Mrs Muramoto had phoned to say she could not come. For the first time since Fumiko had come to stay with me, I began to feel what it might have been like to really have a child of my own.

Is she your daughter? an old woman on the train asked. She was carrying a wicker basket full of frozen fish.

Yes, I said.

She didn't appear at all surprised. I had always assumed it was obvious that Fumiko was not my child. I was old enough to be her grandfather.

Yes, I repeated, she's my daughter.

Such a beautiful child, the old woman said.

But all of this is not what I set out to tell you. It is so difficult not to get sidetracked. And I am sure there are many other things I have forgotten. What I remember happening, happened later.

At Togetsu, we got out. At the time, Togetsu was the end of the line. A series of small, lightly cultivated fields separated it from the surrounding woods. It is mainly tenant farmers who live there. Anyone who gets off at Togetsu is either a farm worker or on their way to the cemetery.

Only half a dozen people stepped down from the train when we pulled into the station. Almost instantly, they were gone.

I don't know how to explain this, he said. How to explain what I felt as we walked through the snow-covered fields and

into the woods. It was so still, you see. So absolutely still. There was no one else about. It was as if the whole world consisted of just Fumiko and me.

Because of the snow, Fumiko's shoes were soon wet. As we entered the path through the woods to the cemetery, I hoisted her up onto my shoulders. I was holding her ankles with my gloved hands. I could feel her fingertips on my head. Far off, we could hear the dull thud of a woodsman's axe. All about us stood the wet-dark trunks of trees, stark against the surrounding whiteness.

As we walked, I was thinking of Fumiko's weight on my shoulders, what a new experience this was for me, how alive her legs felt. I had already begun to plan what I would do, that I would take the opportunity I had been offered to move to Tokyo after all. I know that for some minutes I must have become completely absorbed in my thoughts.

Then, all at once, Fumiko said: It's snowing! And I felt her change position. I looked up to see her outstretched hand trying to catch the large scattered snowflakes that had begun floating down towards us. I thought briefly of turning back. I knew, however, that it would be some time before it began to snow in earnest.

Are you all right, Fumiko? I asked.

Yes, she said.

Shall we turn back?

No, she said emphatically.

It was only when a loud crack rang out close by that I

realised that the sound of the chopping we had heard as we entered the path had ceased. Now it had resumed. We stood and listened for a moment. I could tell that it must be coming from near the stone bridge ahead of us, the one that crossed the stream at the foot of the stairs that led up to the cemetery.

We walked on. The sound came louder now. Every two or three seconds, a loud crack followed by an echo up the mountainside. And now that we were close, I could tell it was not the clean, sharp sound of an axe on wood. There was something different, something muffled about it. A different after-tone. With each step, this sound—regular, thick, solid—filled the air around us. I thought I could feel it through the earth. After one particularly loud crack, I felt Fumiko's body stiffen.

What is it, Father? she asked.

Father. You know, it caught me almost completely unawares. I had been concentrating so much on the sound echoing around us that I nearly missed it. But she had said it at last. The word I had been waiting for.

What is it, Father? I repeated to myself. You cannot imagine how I felt.

I don't know, I said. But I'm sure it's nothing we have to worry about. Shall we go and have a look?

Maybe I'm wrong, he said. Maybe I didn't say that. I was so surprised by Fumiko saying Father that I'm not sure that I said anything at all.

Omura got up out of his chair and went to stand by the

window. The room had fallen into semi-darkness. Jovert sat looking across at him. He could no longer see Omura's features, just his silhouette against the cool blue evening light. A lamp came on in the window of one of the apartments opposite. Jovert saw the figure of a woman appear briefly, raise her arms, then pull the curtains closed.

The evening light was beginning to fade. Jovert felt them both drawing into themselves as the light ebbed from the sky.

When Omura began speaking again, Jovert looked up to find that he had shifted away from the window, so that he could no longer see him. Now, Omura's voice came to him from out of the darkness. Disconnected, invisible, incorporeal. He was speaking slowly now, as if he were back there, back in a place Jovert had never been. And yet, at the same time, he felt Omura's voice drawing him closer to a place within himself that he had never left.

Jovert tried to place him in the shadows, but could not. Maybe it was a trick of light, the square of fading sky beside which Omura must have been standing, and his oddly melancholy voice, hanging suspended in the darkness, slow, still, concentrated.

I do not know if you can imagine what it was like, Omura was saying. It must be difficult for you. You have never been there. So how could I expect you to understand?

He sounded disappointed.

It's strange, he continued. When I recall this moment, I do not remember it as if it was actually me. Of course, I can still

feel Fumiko's weight on my shoulders. I can feel the collar of my coat against my neck. I must have taken my gloves off because, even now, I can feel the texture of Fumiko's stockinged legs, and her shoes. They were new, and black, with silver clasps.

I must have put Fumiko down because I can see myself kneeling beside her, adjusting her jacket, looking into her face. She has the darkest, darkest eyes. There is some snow caught on my cap. Fumiko wants to dislodge it. She tells me to bend my head down. I feel her brushing it away. I look up to see her assessing how good a job she has done. For some reason she laughs, her head to one side. As I stand, I can see, as my hand reaches down, her hand reaches up. I watch as the two of us, me, a tiny—I can't believe how small I am—concentrated little man, already in middle age, and this little girl…as the two of us set off again up the snow-covered path.

You see, Inspector, this is what is so extraordinary. I remember this moment as though I was a spectator, looking on. I see these two figures, a man and his tiny daughter. I see the snow drifting down through the bare, wooded canopy. I can see it settling on my back. I can see our breaths. And even now, inexplicably, I can feel the tension building. Then, without warning, a mighty crash fractures the stillness around us. It is a frightening, terrifying sound.

And yet we press on.

We can hear their voices long before we see them. The sound reverberating off the mountains has led us astray. Gradually, however, muffled voices betray them. Dwarfed by the trees,

a group of huddle-dark figures is gathered at the edge of the frozen pond. One figure, larger than the rest, someone whom I can tell is powerfully built, stands on the frozen surface. He is a little apart from the others, almost facing them.

He has an axe in his hands. Its blade rests on the ice. He seems to be catching his breath. He leans the handle of the axe against his thigh. He says something to the others, shakes his head. He raises his hands to his face, blows on them. I can see his fogged breath. He rubs his palms against his trouser legs and picks up the axe again. He is wearing heavy, studded boots.

I remember watching as he scored the surface of the ice. He steadied himself. For a moment the axe is high above his head, its giant, polished curve hovering. And then the cracking blade is in the ice. Then again. Four or five crashing blows in quick succession. The sound echoes away from us up through the hills.

With each powerful blow, the axeman grunted as he brought the blade down. And each time, a small spray of ice leapt up from the surface of the pond.

It was difficult to tell what he was doing. He appeared to be making a line in the ice. I remember him stopping again for a moment.

We were quite close to them by this stage. But no one seemed to have noticed us, or to care that we were there.

We halted a few metres short of this semicircle of dark figures. For some irrational reason, I felt a surge of panic pass

through me, as though I should just turn around and go, that what was happening here did not concern me.

One of the figures, a man of about my own age, at the edge of the semicircle and half-facing me, glanced up and caught my eye. One or two of the others turned to look at me. There was a moment of absolute silence.

I cannot describe the look on their faces, not hostile, barely curious, immobile. You see, it was as if, all along, they had been waiting there for me.

Omura broke off again, and as he did so, Jovert felt a similar wave of panic pass through his own body, as though what Omura was saying presaged a moment of catastrophic revelation not only for Omura, but for him as well.

It was as if, now that I had arrived, they could finish what they had begun. I was aware of Fumiko tugging at my hand, trying to pull me away. And yet I could not leave. My eyes kept passing from one face to another.

In that strange, hallucinatory state, I bent down to pick Fumiko up. When I looked around again, I saw that they had all turned away from me. I was about to turn away myself—the axeman had picked up his axe once again and was repositioning himself on the ice—when I heard a single cry, a cry so desperate, so lost, that it reached into me and closed around my heart.

I saw the axe blade rise once more, watched it come crashing down. Now, however, between each blow, inescapably, I could hear the low, primitive sound of a woman crying. The group

of figures too had come to life. I stood transfixed by the falling of the axe blade.

As the last blow fell, a sudden movement convulsed the group. From their midst one of them, the woman I assumed had been crying, broke free and fell upon the ice. With wild, almost demented sweeps of her arms, she began frantically trying to clear the shards of broken ice from the frozen surface of the pond. I could not see her face, and it took me a moment to realise that for some reason her hands were bound. As a consequence, each new sweep seemed to obscure what she had just uncovered. This in turn increased her desperation. After two or three sweeps she would pause and lower her head to the ice, as if she was trying to see into its molecular depths. All of a sudden, defeated by what she was doing, she collapsed onto the icy surface.

Inevitably, her actions had drawn me closer, so that now I too stood on the periphery of this semicircle of dark figures looking down on her. No one seemed able to move. I have no idea how long she lay there, half a minute, a minute. I don't know. Then, one of the group, the man who had earlier met my eye, stepped forward. He leaned down and grasped her under the arm. As he raised her to her feet I caught a glimpse of her face. She wasn't a woman at all. She was just a girl.

I was so taken aback that I hardly had time to register her features. Moreover, immediately my gaze fell upon her face, one of the onlookers, an old woman, uttered a loud cry and began clutching at her mouth. It was a moment before I realised that

she was staring at something at her feet. Almost simultaneously, each of us turned to look at the spot where the young girl had lain. I did not, at first, see what the old woman had seen. It was the surface of the ice that struck me first. Where the girl had fallen the thin frosted layer of snow that covered the pond had melted, revealing the hard molten transparency beneath.

I no longer remember, the effect was so overwhelming, the exact instant when the bleached and twisted tree root that I could see trapped just centimetres below this solid surface resolved itself into what it actually was: the foot and leg of a tiny, newborn child.

In a moment of powerful revulsion, I felt myself turning away, and it is now only as an after-image that I can see beyond the perfection of this tiny foot, with its odd node-like arrangement of toes, perfectly ordered, so close to the surface, to see that the rest of the child's body is also more or less visible. It was as though the child had been frozen at the instant it had hit the water. One arm was oddly turned back, as if to break its fall. I can still see part of the crown of a tiny head, with its constellations of fine, dark hair.

What is more extraordinary, however, is that I can see its eyes. They are open. It's as if the child had fallen in such a manner that it appeared to be looking back over its shoulder at the mother who had just flung it from her arms.

By the time I realised this, I had already begun to move away from the group. I could hear the agonised wailing of the girl who by now must have seen what we all had seen.

Fumiko was saying, What is it, Father? What is it?

But I was too shaken to reply, and we set off back down the track in the direction from which we had come.

Omura's voice trailed off. The room was completely dark now. Outside, in the distance, Jovert could see the faint silhouette of the towers of Notre-Dame lit up momentarily by the floodlights of a passing *bateau-mouche*. Then they were gone.