

A tragicomic tale about the preservation of cultural treasure, an intriguing perspective on the coincidences that have determined their place in history and a thrilling and winding story of the human fates that underpin it all.

## RUNAROUND

by Sigrun Palsdottir

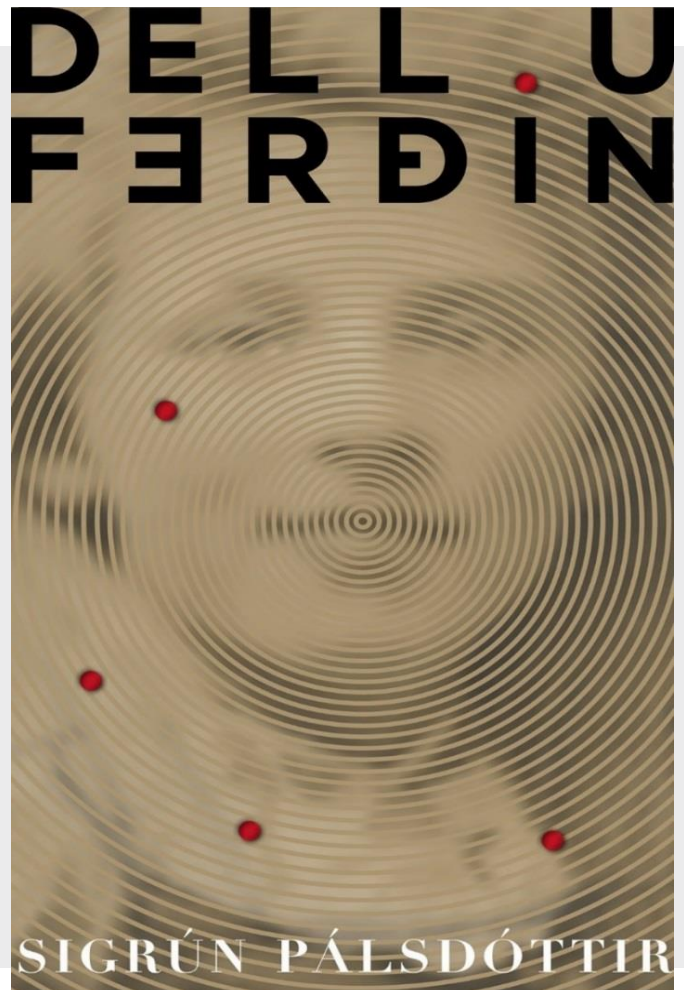
How do you turn old gold into priceless treasure?

At the turn of the 20th century, Sigurlina finds herself in a hopeless situation. She is the motherless daughter of an eccentric father, who expects her to spend her life helping him catalogue Icelandic archeological artefacts.

But Sigurlina has her own ambitions of education and excitement and after a harrowing experience, takes fate into her own hands. She disappears from Reykjavik, along with a historical relic from her father's collection. Through a series of incredible events, the artefact is unveiled at The Metropolitan Museum of New York. Meanwhile, officials in Iceland launch their own investigation into the theft of the artefact.

A hugely entertaining novel with a thrilling plot!

- Shortlisted for the European Union Prize for Literature (EURL) 2021



178 pp, 2019

Chapters in English available

*"An unabashedly creative plot ...  
Hugely entertaining."*

KILJAN, NATIONAL TV

*"Palsdottir writes with the hand  
of a mystery author and the mind  
of a Postmodernist..."*

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY  
(on *History. A Mess.*)



**SIGRUN PALSDOTTIR** (b.1967) completed a Ph.D in the History of Ideas at Oxford University in 2001, after which she was a research fellow and lecturer at the University of Iceland. Since 2007 she has worked free-lance as a writer and editor.

Her books have been nominated for The Icelandic Literary Prize, Icelandic Women's Literature Prize, The Hagbenkir Non-fiction Prize and The DV Culture Prize. Her book *Uncertain Seas* was chosen the best biography in 2013 by booksellers in Iceland.

### FROM THE AUTHOR

"For some time now, I've steeped myself in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Reykjavík, investigating the relationship that little town and its inhabitants had with England and America. A few years ago, I was digging into the dealings a particular Icelandic woman had with Luigi Palma di Cesnola, the first Director of the New York Metropolitan Museum, over some Icelandic silver. The only material thing I had unearthed, however, was a small set of letters that seemed of little value. Still, my curiosity grew to such an unbearable pitch that I felt there was nothing else to do but send another woman, almost 50 years younger, to meet this same Luigi Palma di Cesnola—not in this case bearing Icelandic silver, but a nine-hundred-year-old medieval artifact from Iceland. And when she arrives in New York in 1897, the story takes off, headlong into all kinds of detours and deflections; she has to pull out all the stops to get out of there alive, to get back to Iceland."

## PRAISE FOR *RUNAROUND*

**"I just loved this book. An interesting presentation of the story ..."**

—*Gudrun Baldvinsdottir, Kiljan, Iceland State TV*

**"An unabashedly creative plot inhabits this work. ... Hugely entertaining. ... energy and speed ... a suspense novel with an intricate plot. ... The suspense is compelling ... this is a great book to read on Christmas night."**

—*Thorgeir Tryggvason, Kiljan, Iceland State TV*

**"Overwhelmingly pleasant reading."**

—*Egill Helgason, Kiljan, Iceland State TV*

**„An excellent novel, highly original."**

—*Bjorn Thor Vilhjalmsen, Vidsja, Iceland Broadcasting Service*

**„Written with a rare artistic talent."**

—*Gudmundur Andri Thorsson writer*

**"Playfulness, mirth and fun characterize the storytelling ... The story of Sigurlina's runaround journey from Iceland to New York isn't a thriller, but the plot is at times very thrilling. ... The story is also amusing and fascinating ... it gives a good insight into the lives of the people of Reykjavik around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also into the riveting reality of living in New York in a very interesting time in the city's history ... I found myself not wanting to put the book down ... if only to draw out the reading experience and really build up the anticipation and excitement that came from reading about Sigurlina's travels."**

—*Vera Knutsdottir, Bokmenntaborgin.is*

## PRAISE FOR *HISTORY. A MESS.*

**"Palsdottir writes with the hand of a mystery author and the mind of a postmodernist, teasing out her protagonist's problem while playing with literary forms, fragmenting timelines, and injecting fierce irony."**

—*Publishers Weekly*

**"Absolutely brilliant from beginning to end."**

—Halla Oddny Magnusdottir, National TV

**"An amazing story . . . A very memorable reading experience, and in spite of a serious undertone there's a very finely tuned quiet humour."**

—Julia M. Alexandersdottir, *Morgunbladid*

**"A complex and arresting novel where a super precise style and an ingenious construction come together."**

—Nomination Committee for the Women's Literature Prize

**"Like a cubist work of art."**

—Johanna Maria Einarsdottir, *DV*

**"As her state of mind becomes increasingly fraught, Lytton Smith's adept translation skillfully conveys [the narrator's] neurotic, internal experience, which often expresses possibilities, thoughts, speculation, and interpretations instead of an external reality."**

—Callum McAllister, *Asymptote Journal*

**"*History. A Mess.* . . . is at once a disturbing but riveting portrait of a glassy psyche and an enlightening critique of the constraints and pressures of modern scholarship."**

—Bailey Trela, *Ploughshares*

**"Fans of the nouveau roman—Marguerite Duras, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, etc.—will be right at home here."**

—*Kirkus Reviews*

**"Its ambition is met with resounding success every step of the way."**

—Will Harris, *Books and Bao*

**Pages 7-16**

*The noise came from downstairs, from the living room. A strange murmur of human voices. For a moment, I was sure I was dreaming, because I couldn't make out what was being said. Then I heard my grandmother's low snoring beside me. That told me I was awake. I got out of bed, crawling over her tiny body, and snuck along the attic to lie lay on the floor with my face jutting out part way into the opening at the top of the stairs.*

*Through the tobacco smoke that filled the living room, I could see an elderly man sitting on the couch next to a younger woman. The man was wearing a brown jacket and a blue cravat; the woman was wearing a green overcoat, underneath it a blouse with ivory lace around her neck. Old Magnús was sitting opposite these people; Guðlaug was stood by the coffee pot, pouring a cup. Dad was in the chair under the window and my mother on the chest alongside it, a little away from the smoke and the man's monologue that ended with the young woman in lace saying something and then pointing at her coffee cup. She seemed to be directing her words to my mom, who was smiling and nodding. But I didn't recognize her a smile and, in fact, I found my mother's appearance to be somehow peculiar, her back unusually bowed as she sat against the living room wall. But then she sat up straighter as Dad said a few words I knew were in answer to the foreign woman's questions. After he'd spoken, the two visitors stood to leave, with Magnús and Dad following them out. It was then I got a better look at the woman's outfit, her voluminous skirt spilling away from her tiny waist and swaying in all directions as she glided across the living room floor. I crept back along the floor, climbed over grandma again, and appeared fast asleep by the time mom stroked my cheek. She gently rested her index finger on the tip of my nose. She could tell I was awake.*

*The next morning, no one mentioned the evening visit and I didn't ask. I didn't ask because I didn't need to know anything. The memory of that alien scent was enough for me, the image of the people, the way the visit had somehow enlarged our little living room since that night. Still, it wasn't as if I spent all my time thinking about the glamorous strangers; in fact, I'd almost forgotten their visit until, during the summer, I was helping my mom with the housework and caught sight of a little, colorful picture lying on a stack of papers on my dad's desk. It was on top of some unopened envelopes. A postcard. I put down my cleaning cloth and held the picture in front of me with two hands:*

*Somewhere, in a big city, getting towards dusk, magnificently-sized snowflakes were falling to earth, glinting light across the scene. A little girl was pulling her mother towards a shop window so she could show her a large reindeer. A man with a black top hat and wearing a fur-collared coat held a large package as he led his wife along. In their wake, a young man dragged a large Christmas tree behind himself while on the other side of the street, boys were making snowballs to throw at the gleaming black horse-drawn carriage that was passing by. Everyone was engaged in some activity but had been frozen mid-action. Everyone except the young woman in the right corner of the picture. She seemed to have*



*been standing still before the moment struck and there was no way to know whether she was heading across the street or along it. She was wearing a dark blue coat and had a little red hat on her head; her hands were inside a brown fox fur muff clutched tight to her stomach. Her face was much clearer than the others on the postcard; she looked bewildered.*

*I was wondering if she was there by herself when I realized Mom was standing behind me. She bent down, resting her chin on my shoulder as she looked at the postcard with me. Out the corner of my eye, I saw her smile when she said that this Christmas card was a little late on its travels. Then she straightened up and continued cleaning. I turned the card over. It was addressed to Brand Johnson but in the top corner was the sender's address: New York, December 15, 1879. The writing was difficult to read and messy and of course I didn't understand any of it. But I felt like I knew where the card had come from.*

*Later that same day, after a little pestering, my father let me to keep the postcard. I put it in the little chest I kept by my feet, so I could retrieve it when I had trouble falling asleep after family reading. And no matter how dark the black got that winter of 1880, I could always see the picture if I held the card in front of me long enough. In the darkness, I actually saw something I hadn't noticed before: in a narrow, snow-packed side street, two well-dressed men were facing each other, deep in conversation. As I kept looking, though, I felt as if their attention was actually on the young woman in the red hat with the muff. I came to feel that the despair in her face must stem from knowing that they were watching her—that she was trying to make up her mind what she should do if the frozen moment passed.*

*I felt my hand fall. The postcard fell down onto my blanket and at the same moment the young woman with the red hat ran across the street, through the large and ornate letters in the right corner of the picture, A MERRY CHRISTMAS, and from there out of the frame. Simultaneously, the men were set in motion, heading the same way. They did not run but walked with long strides and confidently across the street, easily clearing through the Christmas greeting and already disappeared by the time I heard a creak on the stairs. I flinched and in my half-conscious state it seemed to me that my grandmother was coming hobbling along the floor to our bed. I lay there, eyes closed, fumbling for the postcard, which I gently snuck under the blanket. Grandma leaned in, but I turned to the other side. And before her rattling managed to lock me within the narrow world of our attic, I myself was dashed into the dark alley, floating there in my white nightgown over the snowdrifts behind the two men and the young woman they were pursuing.*

## A Symposium in Reykjavík, March 1897. The evening draws to a close.

“And she intended to buy this belt end for nearly \$15,000. From the owner, a young Icelandic woman by the name of Branson. Miss Selena Branson.” The Governor rose from his seat. He walked over to the living room window and watched the snowflakes hanging in the air, the light of the white square, Lækjartorg, illuminating the black

darkness: "And now, I ask you, my dear friends, if this Branson woman isn't indeed Sigurlína Brandsdóttir, daughter of Brandur Jónson, the scholar and scribe from Kot in Skagafjörður."

The sixpence in the pudding! Catching the Governor's guests completely off guards. The Chief Justice howled: "Rubbish!"; The Priest wailed, "Oh, no!"; The District Governor burst out: "Brand's pipsqueak?"; The Poet smirked: "Little pipsqueak!"; The Historian cried: "Pawn?"; The Treasurer marveled: "Fifteen thousand dollars? How can one small, old object be so valuable? Isn't that tantamount to all the National Bank's savings?"

But the seventh guest, the handsome young Editor, shows no reaction as he sits slightly apart from the other men, almost up against the wall. He leans forward, his eyes fixed on the small stain on the oriental rug, a hand-woven carpet that covers the floor of this opulent old room. He's trying to bring to mind a girl's face but can't see anything except a thin white gown around a small body, cinched at her waist by a gilded belt, a pretty bosom covered with thin light-colored strands of hair, and an edged collar color with golden embroidery, a Greek pattern. Around her neck, a black ribbon; on her head, a golden tiara. And then, finally, he conjures up her face. First, thin lips which smile, snigger, under a fine nose, a little upturned; the nostrils flare as if the girl tries to hold back her laughter, hold back her strength and character. Her eyes are hidden behind an eye mask. But he can still see them. Aqua under heavy eyelids framed from below by thin, stiff bags. A bewitching glance that drives him crazy, thrills him so that he starts and whispers to himself the name, Sigurlína, then raises his head to see that they are looking at him inquiringly: Governor, Chief Justice, Priest, Commissioner, Poet, Historian, Treasurer. Was he supposed to have said something?

The young man leans back, up against the thick stone wall of this low-ceilinged living room, this old prison, a hovel, as some call this official residence. Leaning back, he almost disappears behind an ailing tropical plant that's standing alongside the wall right next to the white-painted frame around the door that leads out of the room. And there, behind the door, is the maid. Eavesdropping. She's a tall woman and buxom, and she has her ear up to the door. In one hand, she holds an empty crystal carafe; her other hand flies to her mouth. But when none of the Governor's guests seems inclined to react any further to the question he'd asked and the information he'd revealed, the woman retreats cautiously but purposefully from the door. Then she walks briskly down the hallway, unopposed, and heads into the kitchen. She sets down the bottle then tidies away her apron and takes off the cap. In the entry to the back door she puts on her coat, buttons it, and wraps a shawl around her shoulders. She opens the door. A

snowdrift has formed a wall in the doorway that reaches her thighs, but little matter, because she pushes her way out and through with such force that the newly fallen snow whirls up before her. She struggles in the direction of the stone wall that surrounds the house and swings herself deftly over it.

The woman takes short strides, having to lift her legs quite high, down Bankastræti and when she turns onto Austurstræti and is passing by the Treasurer's house, she almost loses her balance. A little cry escapes her lips but in the cold stillness of Reykjavík, it's loud enough to make a young maiden startle and drive a sewing needle into the tip of finger as she sits in her best chair by the living room window, embroidering embossed gold onto green morning shoes. The young woman rises from the chair and brings a small oil lamp up to the window sill. She presses her fair face against the window and takes the bleeding finger out of her mouth: "There's hardly a hurry," and at that very moment, the Governor's fast-moving servant has already disappeared from sight, heading west. And she continues with great purpose, steadily increasing her speed. Then, when she reaches the corner of Aðalstræti, she stumbles upon two crazy, rearing horses, and falls face forward down in the snow. An old woman, a water bearer, standing stock still in the snow in front of Hotel Iceland, sighs some rough, incoherent words into the air but then moves towards the woman, reaching out her swollen, blue hand. The maid waves her away and gets to her feet without assistance. She shakes off the snow as she continues her journey, now taking larger strides than before, almost running, finally even crawling through the snow. It's clear she has no time to lose. She needs to get to the Brand's house in swift order, while the story of Bransson, of little Lína, Sigurlína, with all its digressions, gaps and wonders, is still clear in her head.



\* \* \* \* \*

There was a strange smell in the air. She was in the dark for a long time going this way and that back until suddenly she was by Rubinov's alley. And in front of her, the outhouse. She tore open the door, lifted her skirts and sat down on the coarse wooden plank. She badly needed to get some water and something to dry herself with. Oh, what a mess! Where was the catalogue, the tome that had been lying here on the wooden boards last night? Sigurlína rummaged in her bag and fished out the detective novel. Nick Carter. She hadn't opened that book for quite some time, having been preoccupied with all kinds of thoughts and speculation in recent days. But these four pages she had read were both thin and soft, perfect for wiping. But as she got ready to tear them out, a bookmark, a folded sheet of paper, fell to the floor. She bent down and hunted around for it in the mire.

The moon's reflected light shone through the smashed roof of the outhouse: Waverly Place. There it was, the slip of paper the thick-set estate's executor had reached out for on Hoffmann's desk so he could write down Mrs. Clark's address without realizing what Sigurlína is about to find out: The piece of paper was Hoffmann's stationery. A beginning of a letter, dated the day he died:

*Bergdorf. Riverside Drive.  
October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1896*

*Dear Miss Anderson,  
I have now read through the draft of your book.  
Gudrid and I will say*

That was it; nothing more. Perhaps Hoffmann had been disturbed mid-sentence, perhaps Mr. Gilbert knocking on the door with a fresh delivery in crackling machine paper? No, Sigurlína thought it more likely that something else would have stopped the master of the house. Hoffmann had simply not had the courage to say what he really thought about this impetuous, sensational story by Miss Brenda Anderson, which Sigurlína had only managed to read halfway, but which now came back to her, vividly.

Someone kicked the door. Someone with an urgent need outside the outhouse. But

their distress had no effect on Selena Branson. She wasn't done. She was glued to the seat, that coarse hole within the dank-smelling darkness, thinking about the words. She closed her eyes, and in front of her appeared Hoffmann, eyes light and far away. And from there, he looked through her, and disappeared as the wooden floor of the chamber began to vibrate under her toes, the little black shoes she tapped on the wooden boards: "You need history to turn old gold into priceless treasure." But it's not General Cesnola speaking but Sigurlína herself. Reaching into her purse, she took out the brooch. She pressed her finger on the pin that protruded from its back. No needle? For a few seconds, the crush in her head grew so great that she feared it would break, then the clasp released and a smile played across her face. That smile which made people think that of her as a girl holding in a laugh, that smile which made men think she was making fun of them. She held the brooch horizontally in front of her. A clasp for a cape? Who'd said that? She let the precious object drop into her handbag: "For you, my lady Gudrid." Then she ripped out the first pages of the detective story from the loose spine and wiped herself carefully.

## Maggie O'Reilly

She managed to get some water from the bucket in front of the couple's bedroom, gathered up a few pieces of fabric from the floor and flung herself onto the bed. But although she was almost bent double by the twists and turns of the day, she couldn't fall asleep. In all likelihood she would have to complete her mission while others slept. Through the window at the other end of the sewing room was a light from the street, but first she had to sneak over to Rubinov's desk and swipe a little ink, an envelope and a stamp. She had a pen in her purse herself.

Sigurlína gently placed Hoffmann's letter on the cutting board under the window, using a blank page at the back of the Nick Carter novel to practice writing, composing the letter and verifying whether it fit with Hoffmann's, this one sheet. His writing, which she knew well enough to imitate, was rather small:

Bergdorf. Riverside Drive  
October 19th, 1896

Dear Miss Anderson,  
Gudrid and I will say

Sigurlína gently dipped her nib into Rubinov's inkwell, stroking it carefully over the absorbent page of the crime story, and took a deep breath as she picked up the thread where Hoffmann had left it.

*that I much enjoyed reading it. It seems thoroughly researched on all important issues but most importantly Gudrid comes vividly alive through your excellent portrayal of appearance and character, and elaborated description of clothes and jewelry. Indeed a brass belt end found in the eroded ruins of a medieval farm in the northern part of Iceland, believed to have belonged to Gudrid, recently came into possession of an Icelandic assistant of mine. A piece you would most certainly be interested in.*

*I wish you all the best as you continue with this very promising work.*

*Yours faithfully,  
Dr. Franz W. Hoffmann*

Sigurlína watched the ink dry, pen in trembling hand. She took an envelope from Rubinov's things and tried to stop herself thinking about the fact that its texture and weight differed from the letter; it was not especially convincing as a wrapping for Hoffmann's sophisticated stationery. She folded the page and sealed the envelope. Of course she had not forgotten Brenda's address. Then she crawled into her corner, placing the letter in her purse, which she had snuck under her stiff, heavy blanket. But she did not manage to fall asleep, especially after she realized that the belt Einar Þorgeirsson, the jeweler, had brought to Gudrid was probably not mentioned in any of the ancient texts of the Saga of Erik the Red. The belt was, like so many things in Miss Anderson's story, a pure fabrication.

And so, Sigurlína was of two minds when she emerged onto the street the following morning. But it was actually something else that led her to doubt the plot she'd had felt was so ingenious last night while sitting in the outhouse. Wasn't it just more spur of the moment madness? If the brooch, the belt end, that is to say, were to find a place in world history thanks to this letter, how would the letter's recipient manage to reach the owner of the relic, Sigurlína, given that she wasn't the sender of the letter, according to the plot? And it was much more than that: not only was the letter a fake, but its content

was a fiction. Didn't she need to think this scheme through all the way to its conclusion? No, damn it, she couldn't afford to think about the consequences of her actions at this moment when her life had become nothing but an ordeal, day in and day out. And with that assurance, she walked across the street and toward the mailbox.

Yet that assurance did not prove enough for her, because just before she finished crossing the street she stopped. As if someone had pulled her back. As if a giant hand from heaven had pinched the back of her coat between index finger and thumb, and pulled her up off the ground and shook her vigorously: It was not just the consequences she had to fear—that her crime would be revealed—but the act itself. Now she stood rigid with her hands by her sides, drawing deep breaths until all the spark was gone from her: That was a crime she might well plan in order to nourish her weak hope but not actually carry out.

Back to square one. Back across the street, with heavy little steps, not caring where she put her feet. And what happened next had been coming for days. With all these walks around the big city, the sole that Mathiesen the cobbler of Reykjavík had nailed on her tiny boot had begun to loosen, and now, this cold morning in early December, it twisted half off and gave way as she set her foot on a stone in the middle of the street, causing her, Sigurlína Brandsdóttir, the daughter of Brandur Jónsson from Kot in Skagafjörður, to lose her balance. As she fell, she threw her hands into the air and the bag with them, the little embroidered purse flying up into the air and then down to the street just before she herself hit the ground.

She lay dazed for a while, trying to get up. There were people going about their business all around her, but no one seemed to notice what had happened. No one except a single bystander. An old woman standing beside by a food cart on what you might call a sidewalk and rushed across the street at high speed toward Sigurlína. The woman, wearing a thick coat with a fur collar, a fur hat on her head; she wasn't carrying a bag. By the time Sigurlína had gathered herself, the woman had already bent down to the street, grabbed the purse, and thrust herself back into the throng. She moved her feet briskly away, even as she hobbled, from the street then slowed as she turned onto the Bowery. She could not know that at the very same moment as she snatched Sigurlína's possessions off the street, Officer Cooke was turning onto Hester Street. He didn't give a moment's thought to Sigurlína, who was lying staring after her bag on the dusty earth, because it was Maggie O'Reilly who was uppermost on his mind. Oh, how many times he'd been a hair's breadth from clasping hold of the city's most notorious pickpocket, and this time he was determined to succeed. He jostled through the throng

in his double-breasted overcoat and strode large strides along the street after the old woman, and when she turned onto Canal Street he made a move to grab her. He set his big, bent paw on the old woman's shoulder and clasped hold of her before spinning her vigorously around. He looked into her dark countenance: cold eyes, a grimacing slit of a mouth set on coarse, gray skin. They stared at each other for a while. O'Reilly, a.k.a Blue Edie, made no attempt to break free, simply allowing the watch officer to lead her all the way up to Elm Street and into the gaol.

While this journey was underway, Sigurlína was running up and down Hester Street searching for her purse. O'Reilly's awfully swift snatching of the bag had passed her by, but she had begun to suspect a theft. Still, she ran around there like a madwoman and even began crying out. The few who paid her any mind gave her the evil eye so she came to a halt, standing still on the sidewalk as people traversed the street, to and fro. The longer she stood in that one spot, the more difficult it became to stir herself. Her head was spinning, a storm whirling inside it. She didn't dare move.

Officer Cooke had by now gone the length of Mulberry and was in his headquarters. He sat down at his desk and placed the stolen goods on the table. He looked out the window, sighed as he regarded the sea of people, this sticky, cruel chaos. The day's work had not brought him the satisfaction he was expecting; on the contrary, his struggle with the old pickpocket had disturbed him, and somewhat sapped his strength. He reached out for the embroidered bag and turned it out on his desk. A pen nib, a cracked hair comb, a small, paper-thin notebook marked Selena Branson, a pencil stub, a stained handkerchief embroidered with S and B, a fragment from a dime novel, four pennies, and a small metal object, partly gilded. The officer looked at the stuff on the table in front of him and sighed. Then he lifted the bag as if he wanted to smell the Icelandic flower. *Dryas octopetala*. And that's how he discovered the envelope at the bottom. His melancholy now turned to curiosity. He did not recognize the recipient's name, but the address piqued his interest and suggested to him that he should mail the letter. But it also raised his hopes of finding the owner of the bag and returning the bits and bobs that it contained.

**Translation: Lytton Smith**