

The Electric Baths

Jean-Michel Fortier

Katherine Hastings, Translator

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Jean-Michel Fortier's *The Electric Baths* sets its compressed intrigue in a village where everyone seems to know everyone else's business.

Though the novel is brief, its characters are complex, replete with quirks, anxieties, hope, disillusionment, and the collective identity that people in a small town often share. Communication may be limited in their vague era of horse-drawn carts and few telephones, but old Mr. Roux is sure to snatch up each new happening like "an apple from a fruit stall" and spread the news with nasty glee.

There is prideful Louise Beurre, who ran away with the circus and had a brief career as an actress in Paris, and who is now a "big, buttery flop," according to Mr. Roux, forced to return to her strange hometown. Renée struggles with a polio-crippled leg and the torments of her mind, while widowed Bella places classified ads in the newspaper to find a new husband, longing to unite "fortunes and fates" and specifying that criminals and "destitutes" need not reply.

As the town's peevish familiarity develops, elements of a mystery also begin to appear. A cloaked woman in the woods begs for water, putting spells and curses on anyone who refuses her. Bella's prospective husbands arrive, yet soon vanish once she decides the relationships won't work. Meanwhile, Renée is offered a job at Spencer Wood, the town's imposing manor estate, a place that also houses mysterious "electric baths." Such baths, as Spencer Wood's owner explains, involve electrical heat issued into a "sarcophagi"-shaped box. The objective is weight loss and increased vitality, but these particular electric baths are haunted by more tragic results.

Through its fine translation by Katherine Hastings, *The Electric Baths*'s exquisite language and wry omniscience result in a dark, delightful landscape of curious happenings.

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