

## Kannitverstan on Kennedy

*a calendar story,  
adapted from Johann Peter Hebel's German original*

*Once upon a time there was a journeyman wordsmith right happily journeying from jolly Costentz, via rollicking Tuttlingen in the merry duchy of Württemberg, to the far afield capital city of ..., to see the world and, perhaps, acquire some wisdom.*

*The road ran alongside the grand-ducal estate, only separated from the garden by the blithely-babbling brook of the Moselle. Beside it stood a neat little toll-house with a red tiled roof and a gaily-fenced flower garden, the turnpike forlornly stretching far into the green countryside that must have been the Eurozone. The toll-keeper who occupied it had recently died and his post remained vacant ...*

... When he at last arrived, on the balmiest Indian summer Sunday afternoon within living memory, it felt like the British had by no means been the only ones to have deserted the Quartier Européen. Not a soul promenading on the Avenue John F. Kennedy, traffic the opposite of pulsating. Only the spaceships of Luxtram, on a side lane all of their own, swished past at rush-hour intervals, colourfully illuminated but bereft of passengers in either direction. The inn hid at the other end of a dark hole of a tunnel – or had he lost his way, and this was the World Heritage Site of the fortress and casemates of Dräi Eechelen?



In a slight variation on ever the same running theme of failure and punishment, tonight's nightmare was set in some operatic grand duchy, now a deserted war-zone wasteland, where the journeying wordsmith had been banished because he could think of no etymologies for *casemates* and *bulwark* that would convince his sinister interrogator (uncannily resembling a master tunesmith of his acquaintance specialising,

not in etymology at all, but in the origin of word tones in the Moselle Franconian area from mispronunciations of returning journeymen masons who had erected a cathedral in Cologne). On Monday, heading for the tram after a late breakfast, they – for three other journeymen wordsmiths had by now fallen in with him – stumbled down a confusingly triangular arrangement of marble steps to cross John F. Kennedy at the Philharmonie corner. It didn't look like the transit rate was going to pick up at this Eurozone hub on workdays, either. Still, although this wasn't Costentz, he pushed the button and they waited for the traffic lights to turn. Two cars, probably the only ones today to bustle downtown for the new week, must have been nonplussed at the sight of a foursome of pedestrians. The first decided at the last moment not to mow them down, braked and, to grant them an inch to squeeze past on the zebra crossing, backed up, far enough to smash into the BMW that had screeched to a late halt right behind it. Both drivers, unscathed so far as could be determined in the circumstances, with only their pinstripes a bit ruffled, emerged from their wrecks, wasting no time to start shaking their fists and yelling at the four journeymen wordsmiths. These didn't understand a word of it, and were in a pensive mood on the tram, because they had been instructed to get off at Pfaffenthal, but if Luxembourgish was not, as they had been led to believe, a mere dialect of German, perhaps Pafendall, as now announced on on-board screens, was an entirely different destination.



Safely returned from Luerenzweiler, just beyond Dommeldange and Walferdange and in the west bordering on Schwunnendell in the canton of Mersch, late afternoon on that same day saw our four journeymen wordsmiths once more cross John F. Kennedy, though now in the opposite direction. With no vehicles anywhere near as usual, they were, again, exercising patience at the red traffic light on the Cour de justice de l'Union européenne side, while a family of five, hailing from south of the Eurozone's frontier by their looks, had already set out from the Philharmonie side, unheeded of the stoplight. Father and two adolescent daughters, keeping their distance from each other as one does at this difficult age, each progressed beyond the lane divider unhindered, while mother and the little one, following hand in hand behind them, failed to negotiate an obstacle in its middle. Stopped dead in their tracks as the inseparable pair were passing a signpost on either side, they comically – although this of course was exactly what Newton's laws of bodies in motion predicted – pirouetted into a head-on collision. No time was lost by mother giving son a good scolding, but just which Dravidian language she had chosen

for the occasion remained a riddle to the four journeymen wordsmiths, because naturally, in the circumstances, they were hesitant to inquire. For all they knew, it might have been Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, any of the lot really. In a way, word endings there behaved so plain uniform everywhere – “agglutinative”, as they facetiously used to be called among journeymen wordsmiths, just glued on ...

*... Calling adieu right and left to his poor old friends and comrades going back to work, he right happily proceeded southwards across the open fields towards rollicking Diddeleng, or Dudelage as the burghers quaintly preferred to pronounce it, for next on the journeyman wordsmith's itinerary was merry Strossburi, sub-metropolis of the land of Cockaigne. Pausing at another neat little toll-house with a red tiled roof and a gaily-fenced flower garden whose toll-keeper had recently died, the turnpike forlornly stretching far into the green countryside that must have been the Eurozone, tears stood in his eyes as he now understood for the first time: Der Mensch hat wohl täglich Gelegenheit, in Tuttlingen so gut als in Dudelage, Betrachtungen über den Unbestand aller irdischen Dinge anzustellen, wenn er will, und zufrieden zu werden mit seinem Schicksal, wenn auch nicht viel gebratene Tauben für ihn in der Luft herumfliegen.*