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**Norbert Gstrein**  
**The Business of Killing**  
**Novel**

**Translated by Mike Mitchell**

Oddly enough, Paul had kept Allmayer's articles back until last, and when he did finally hand them to me, it was with a casualness I didn't buy. There were several dozen sheets, a whole pile of newspaper cuttings and photocopies, all arranged in order of publication. As soon as I looked through them I could see he'd been working on them, making notes in the margins, underlining some passages or highlighting them in different colours. Once, and that was all part of it, he gave the game away and described them as 'the documents'; as I had expected, he started to grow impatient while I still had them in my hands and it wasn't long before he was giving me the commentary he clearly felt was indispensable.

'His reports begin with the skirmishes on the Slovenian border with Austria and end in Kosovo,' he said, his tone half that of a personal comment, half of an official announcement. 'In between are almost exactly eight years and hundreds of thousands dead.'

My automatic response to these figures was one of horror, and he didn't need to go into details, I was prepared for the worst as, pointing to the cuttings, which were still lying on my knees, he suddenly went on in a low voice.

'What that all adds up to is a record of the end of Yugoslavia.'

Beyond that, it contained the whole of Allmayer's journalistic career and for a moment I was stunned when Paul told me that, apart from a period as a trainee with another paper, he had nothing to show other than his reports from so-called crisis areas.

'You won't believe it when I tell you what he really had in mind,' he went on, then answered my question before I had even asked it. 'You might think I'm making this up, but he wanted to write.'

I didn't try to conceal my surprise.

'But that's what he was doing all the time.'

Even before I'd spoken the words, he was looking at me as if I were deliberately misunderstanding him and immediately protested.

'You know what I mean,' was his bald reply. 'Think what you like, for me he was an aesthete.'

Quite apart from the fact that I didn't like the word and Allmayer, from the way I saw him, was the last person I would have applied it to, it sounded like a joke, but

when I wanted to know how then he had come to end up doing the dirty work, Paul picked up the expression simply in order to nail me with it.

That was the way he was, and I knew it was best to keep my mouth shut and watch him as he waved his hands in the air, handing out the blows as if with every jab he were beheading some invisible opponent to defend the honour of his friend.

‘You can call it what you like,’ he said eventually, ‘if you think you’re superior. But then would you mind telling me who else would have taken all that on without complaining?’

When he went on to say that it was not purely chance that it had fallen to a man of peasant stock from the Tyrol, it was all I could do not to burst out laughing at such a pompous expression. Behind it, as I came to suspect for the first time, was the complex about his provincial background Helena talked of later, his self-pity, his feeling of being disadvantaged simply because he came from the country, his chip on the shoulder and his wrong-headed idea of what it was to be a man.

‘You couldn’t have sent any of the Armani suits you get on the editorial staff to the war,’ he said. ‘Most of them would have shit themselves as soon as they heard a rifle go off and been on the first plane home.’

That was nonsense, but I said nothing. Let him see the world whatever way he wanted, it didn’t affect me. I wasn’t even disappointed with him, only impatient. His *idées fixes* were no use to me and I was just waiting for him to get it over with.

I can’t remember exactly what else we talked about, but I do know that he was determined to tell me it was he who had drawn Allmayer’s attention to the school of journalism in Hamburg he had attended after finishing university. This he confided to me in an all-too transparent mixture of remorse and pride, as if by doing so he had paved the way for him, by implication also, I’m afraid, the way to disaster. It was the same abrupt attempt to establish a closeness to Allmayer I had noticed before, I tell myself, the same urge to establish a connection to him which he would immediately abandon if I pointed out the dubious nature of such an attempt, only to try it again, and to keep on trying until eventually I tired and let him have his way.

Further confirmation of the extent to which he regarded the whole business as his own property came when I asked him, as I left, to let me keep Allmayer’s articles until the following day, so that I could photocopy them. It was obvious he would

most of all have liked to say no; he was so distrustful, his fear of having to hand something over came across so clearly in his question, *What for?* When he did agree, he made me promise to bring them to him at the station before he left the next morning. Finally he went to the trouble of numbering all the pages, and as he counted out loud and wrote the numbers in over-large figures at the bottom of each sheet, I picked up the banknote that had fallen out of the pile, turned it over and over, and wagged it in front of his face.

It was a five-hundred-million-dinar note, issued by the Republic of Serbian Krajina in Knin. There was something quite eerie about it, and it didn't just come from the absurd amount but also from that ill-starred would-be state that no longer existed, something like the feeling aroused by trashy devotional articles, or the emblems, medals and weapons of defunct regimes that ruled by terror, they all have that same unreal quality, in which I found it difficult to imagine people of flesh and blood trading with it only five years previously.

‘What do you think you could have got for it?’

It was a pointless question, something I realised even before I asked, but Paul just took the note from me and laughed as he carefully folded it and put it in his pocket.

‘Everything anyone could wish for,’ he replied, spreading his arms wide in a gesture a TV quiz-master would have been proud of. ‘Even at the worst times, apparently, with the right connections people in the interior of the country could get still fresh fish from the Adriatic through all the battle zones.’

I didn't pay much attention to what he said, not taking it seriously, and yet it stuck in my mind, all the more because I've long come to suspect it was correct, but instead of pursuing the topic, I just asked him whether he'd got his grotesque souvenir from Helena and acquiesced when he grinned and waved the idea away.

‘Helena wouldn't touch something like that with a bargepole.’

I can remember that I took my leave immediately after and went — up Alter Wall, across Rathausmarkt, down Neuer Wall — to find a copy shop, and I started looking at Allmayer's articles as soon as I got on the suburban railway at Jungfernstieg, to go out to Altona where I was living at the time. When I arrived home I called up the office, where I was supposed to be manning the duty desk that evening, standing in for a colleague, and called off sick, made myself a thermos of coffee and lay down

with the papers on the sofa. I would like to say I was plunged into a feverish world, but the worst nightmares of my childhood were mild in comparison. As I reached the last page, it was just getting dark, the sky stretching its last, threadbare blue over the roofs of the houses opposite; it suddenly occurred to me that the whole time I had not noticed the noises of the trains entering and leaving the nearby station, the rhythm of which usually divided up my day, and I thought of Helena, it could have been any woman but I set my mind on her, taken unawares by the ridiculously sentimental fantasy of having survived the war together with her, of coming back to her after it was all over, or, even better, simply coming back, however paradoxical that sounds, I didn't want to have to go through trials and tribulations for it, like some deluded hero of the silver screen, simply coming back without having been away at all.

It wasn't the obvious acts of cruelty that bemused me most while I was reading, not the atrocities Allmayer had witnessed or heard about during all those years, not the pictures of deserted Bosnian villages with dogs on the loose tearing at the bodies lying among houses blasted apart by shells. He listed so many examples that nothing would have surprised me, apparently there are no limits to the things you can do to the human body; the only thing that did amaze me was the fantasies that blossomed in the minds of people who until then had been what I suppose we must call respectable, the pleasure they took in forcing one prisoner to bite off another's testicles and eat them in front of him, in slitting open the belly of a pregnant woman, in cutting the throat of a child in its mother's arms and forcing her face into the stream of blood spraying out or in raping a woman before the eyes of her dying father. For every place that had become known, he mentioned half a dozen others I had never even heard the names of, never mind being able to spell them or remember who had killed whom there, and although there was no doubt that the gentlemen from Knin, Banja Luka and Pale always had a few heads lead over the rest, as did the agents of the Belgrade mafia over their opponents from Zagreb and Mostar, not to mention those in Sarajevo, I didn't even try to make sense of the chaos. There was no river that had not had dead bodies floating down it, no square, it seemed to me, where in future we wouldn't be asking ourselves what was hidden beneath it, but that wasn't what etched itself most precisely on my memory from his reports, on the contrary, the more details

he accumulated, the more they seemed to cancel each other out, within the framework they created even the worst atrocities ended up by seeming normal.

Perhaps it sounds cynical, but for me the horror only took on concrete form when he wrote of the tanks warming up their engines in the barracks, right at the beginning of the conflict, the ominous sound coming over the walls, of the patrol boats cruising up and down the Danube on the Serbo-Croatian border, or the ships in the bay outside Šibenik, the way they slowly appeared out of the murk in the early morning light, completely silent until they started to bombard the town. It is his description of a spot where a massacre had taken place one year before he was there, the picture of a truly idyllic spot, were it not for the cartridge cases he found, the grotesque peacefulness which makes me shake my head whenever I think of it, there couldn't have been a more terrible place to die than in that midsummer clearing surrounded by beeches and poplars, with the scent of elder, the chirping of crickets, the murmuring of a stream, where time seemed to stand still. Among all the other material he unearthed, it is individual images that have fixed themselves in my mind, it is a white refrigerated truck standing at the edge of a burial ground, it is the columns of refugees he saw fleeing literally in all directions, thousands upon thousands driven from their homes, and he doesn't even once say they went without a moment's notice, left everything where it was and simply fled, the meal still on the table, the washing on the line, which sounds made up when it's repeated, it is the bed-and-breakfast owners on the coast wringing their hands at the absence of holiday-makers, the two old women in Split who told him that when they got back to their villages they'd have three pigs and make the finest ham in Dalmatia again, or the children who ran after him in Opatija and other places, begging, the swarm growing each time he distributed a handful of dinars or kunas among them.

In the end there was a whole host of people he must have met over the years, people from all the different camps who gave him their version of what was going on, army generals, who received him in their villas, all jovial, or in the field in full combat fatigues, and pretended war was just a job and no dirtier than any other, guerillas and militiamen in absurd uniforms boasting about their infamous deeds, mercenaries from all over Europe, some of whom had fought for all sides, and other characters, chancers for whom the word gambler was a compliment. He had talked to all of them,

he had visited Serbian and Croatian prison camps and gradually become aware that he had not asked the prisoners the right questions because the answers were too clear, he had talked to them only to end up silent, as he wrote in a highly emotional passage, not saying another word, looking away in shame and then being ashamed of looking away in the face of these men, nothing but skin and bone, with whom he had come face to face. Whether you thought that was glossing things over or not, arranging things so as not to disturb his readers in their comfortable armchairs, that probably expressed something that was always there in his later interviews: irritation at any kind of chatter when he talked to the first tourists, who appeared on the Dalmatian coast again once the catastrophe was over and drove in their cars through Karst villages that had been reduced to rubble or went on day trips to Bosnia; resistance to the self-promoting bigwigs who for a while flew in almost weekly from all over the world to give the natives the benefit of their wisdom and explain why they were smashing each others' skulls in; and humility at knowing much too much and at the same time nothing at all, at least nothing beyond the usual banalities about the causes of it all. It was all the more surprising that he himself struck a wrong note so often, that he kept insisting on bringing in the Ustaša at every possible opportunity and going on at similarly excessive length about the Chetniks, that he couldn't call a rifle a rifle, it had to be a Kalashnikov, especially when it was a woman holding it and you could tell between the lines how it both repelled and aroused him, or that he couldn't meet anyone without drinking slivovitz with them, I counted at least two dozen instances in his articles. Those were just a few examples, but when, to cap it all, he was even taken in by the supposed girl from Sarajevo and her diary, a kitschy concoction that had gone all over the world, when he quoted from it, moved to tears and refusing to accept how false a sentence like *Dear Mimmy, The political situation is crazy* sounded from the pen of a thirteen-year-old, then all you could do was shake your head and quote at him the verdict, which he himself had recorded, of one of the warlords, his rejection of easy moralising, more than that, his amusement that anyone should feel any moral scruples in wartime: they were, he had said, ridiculous, a grotesque luxury, at most something for idiots and Americans.

So the first thing I did when I met Paul the next morning, was to ask him whether he had noticed how poorly parts of the articles were written, but he just waved my question away.

‘It’s the newspaper’s house style that’s to blame,’ he said. ‘If you’re trying to please everyone, most things get twisted.’

Then he went on to make a bizarre remark.

‘The teachers are responsible for some of it.’

I thought it was meant as a joke and laughed, but he took it more seriously than I had thought, or perhaps he just wanted to pursue the idea until he had squeezed every last drop out of it.

‘When they teach essay-writing in school, every snotty-nosed kid gets it drummed into them that they must avoid repeating the same word at all cost,’ he went on. ‘The result is masters of the synonym who always replace a word or expression by the next worst one.’

At first I couldn’t quite follow what he was getting at, but before he had talked himself into a cul-de-sac, he was back with Allmayer and clearly had precisely the same thing in mind that had struck me.

‘You just have to see how quick on the draw he is with the big words,’ he said. ‘Although there may be some places where they’re justified, it’s a disaster if it happens systematically or simply because it’s sloppy writing.’

We had met in the station buffet with plenty of time, there was still just about an hour to go to his train, and as the people came and went, he reviewed Allmayer’s last weeks, astonished at all the places he’d managed to get to, all those godforsaken holes along the border with Kosovo, starting with the camp he had tormented Helena with, all those wretched little towns crammed full of refugees, sometimes with bombers flying over them high in the sky. As he went through Allmayer’s route, I tried to imagine him, exhausted in the back of the car with his photographer, their interpreter driving them over a road strewn with potholes, tried to visualise him talking to a group of insurgents at the bar of the only luxury hotel in Tirana, a foreigner among all those men ranting on and on at him, complaining of decades of oppression, suddenly shaking their fists, the black double-headed eagle on a red background menacing on their sleeves, tried to picture him wandering round a harbour town in southern



Albania and all I had eyes for was the crush on the station platforms, the figures pouring out of the trains and spreading out over the whole town, apparently aimlessly and yet according to a strict mathematical law. As if he had had a premonition of what was going to happen, I thought, aware at the same time how meaningless that was, as if the sole purpose of all his toing and froing was to get him to the wrong place at the wrong time, when he met his fate, and it was true what Paul said about the before and after of such disasters, he was right, you could approach the point at which someone died from whichever way you liked, you could keep reducing the gap between the moment when they were still alive and the moment when they were already dead until the thought that anything at all could have happened in between became almost too much to bear.

But talking about it was futile, empty verbiage that got us nowhere, so I asked him to stop and explain instead the criteria by which he had marked the passages in the sheaf of papers on the table in front of us.

‘I couldn’t say,’ he replied. ‘And it doesn’t matter, either, since for me there’s not much doubt what is the most important thing about the whole collection.’

To his mind there were two things alone which made Allmayer’s work worthwhile and, astonishingly enough, he let me in on them.

‘Just think of that interview with the soldier and that story of the Albanian youth who must have been shot from behind during an attack,’ he said, as if it was something he’d long been familiar with. ‘You might think it’s taking it a bit too far, but when you know how he died, those two episodes sound almost like omens.’

It’s true they could have pointed to him, even though they were far apart in both time and space, the description — an indictment in itself — of a murder deep in Kosovo that he had published at the beginning of the year, and his game of question-and-answer, which had achieved widespread publicity, with a Croatian warlord, a sinister, unpredictable character, whom he had met on the Slavonian front, not far from the Serbian border, a month after the fall of Vukovar, which his men had had to surrender after weeks of fighting.

The previous evening I had read about the boy bleeding to death in a ditch with a growing feeling of horror, and in the morning I remembered he was said to have been wounded in the abdomen and chest when, leafing through the newspapers, I came

across a report on Allmayer's own injuries, below the solar plexus, it said, shots from a few hundred metres away, from an automatic rifle, and that his internal organs had been torn to shreds.

'If you were superstitious, you might think he brought it down on himself,' I said, although I realised it was stupid. 'You couldn't anticipate your own death more precisely than he did.'

But Paul was set on talking about the interview Allmayer had recorded near Vinkovci a few days before Christmas in the first year of the war which always gave me the shivers every time I read it, he could have been talking to the man who was to be his murderer, been asking him what it was like, aiming at a human being, what the feeling was when a head appeared all at once in your sights and you had your finger on the trigger.

'The incident when he was robbed in Bosnia must have been much later,' he said. 'Otherwise he probably wouldn't have risked going to meet the man at all.'

I gave him a sceptical look and he went on, 'If there was any doubt, he would hardly have put himself, of his own free will, in a situation which had almost cost him his life once already.'

That was too neat for me and I replied that perhaps he had got Allmayer wrong, he couldn't be sure he wouldn't be prepared to do anything for a good story.

'It could be there came a point when he threw caution to the winds,' I said. 'That would be sufficient to explain his behaviour.'

Clearly he had managed, through his interpreter, to be issued with a special pass which allowed him to get to the most advanced positions, from which the Serbian lines were sometimes not much more than a stone's throw away, and he painted a desolate scene, a group of houses with the windows blown out, a few bare trees and a maize field covered in a thin layer of snow, the remains of bent and rotting plants, a complete chaos, plus a burnt-out car tipped onto its roof, a zigzag line of sandbags and, as he put it, the wide, unforgiving Pannonian sky. For the first time the full extent of the depression that had taken hold of him showed, a feeling of being totally exposed, even though only the evening before he had been going round the cafes in Zagreb with a woman he knew, a shock, as if after the loss of childhood there was one more transition, one that excluded you from humanity, so bewildered he was at

finding himself in this purgatory with half a dozen complete strangers, cocky looking lads sitting round a stove in a roofless house whilst a guard kept an eye on things outside. Now and then one excused himself and, bending low, squeezed his way the few metres along the shoulder-high trench right outside the door to the latrine, from time to time there were a few desultory shots, as he noted down meticulously, once, in the distance, he recognised the sound of a shell, but no one ducked any more at its surprisingly soft whistle; equally resigned was the lament he struck up, his insistence that those on the other side had been their neighbours, their workmates, two years ago, he claimed, they had still been driving down to the Danube together for a swim, had been playing football together, celebrated their summer festivals year after year, even, if there was nothing else for it, married each others' sisters. He suspected they were putting it on specially for him when one of them picked up the telephone and called up the other side, or so he said, bawling out his, *Anyone there?* and, *Cedo! Hi, how's things?* so loud it could be heard for miles around, going on for so long with his teasing and gibes, his voice getting shriller and shriller, he eventually dashed out and, bellowing like a berserker, emptied a whole magazine into the twilight that was already falling in the middle of the afternoon.

According to Allmayer, what he then actually learnt from the leader of the unit was not particularly useful. He wasn't telling him anything surprising when he confessed it was difficult at first to press the trigger, and the only thing perhaps a bit out of the ordinary about it was the comparison with a girl who initially is inhibited about taking off her clothes for money but then quickly gets used to the idea, until whoring comes so naturally it's as if it was what she'd been destined for from the very beginning. He hardly got anything out of him apart from the confession that it was only after the first time that he wished he could turn the clock back, from then on every further time seemed like an opportunity to erase the memory, and that wasn't what was outrageous, the real outrage lay in giving him, a presumed murderer, a chance to blow his own trumpet without calling him to account, letting him strut his stuff, rattle on uninterrupted without wondering whether he wasn't just having you on, talking big, saying he'd only finish his break when he'd potted as many heads as there were beads on a rosary.

That was a striking simile, but Paul himself brought out the Biblical imagery when he told me how he had looked through a telescopic sight just once in his life and wished ever since that he hadn't. It was at home, years ago, the rifle of a hunter who had placed it on the roof of his car, and he said that when he saw three deer through it on the hillside opposite, standing in the waist-high grass without moving, it had seemed obscene to him, a kind of sin, whether you liked the word or not. What he was getting at sounded paradoxical, but only at first, then it made perfect sense, namely the sudden shock of surprise, as he stood there, holding his breath while he observed the deer, at the knowledge that paradise could never have been paradise for the simple reason that it had not been left alone, from the very beginning had been subject to the eye of God.

Of course I realised these flights of extravagance were just a display he was enjoying putting on for me. He was leaning back in his chair, hands behind his head as if he really took his pose seriously, waiting for me to burst into exclamations of admiration, or at least ask him to cut the crap. He had spoken in a quiet voice and was looking at me, so in order to avoid his eye I picked up the pile of Allmayer's articles and started leafing through them again, until I came to the interview, and had another look at the photo illustrating it.

It showed a man standing, legs apart, a rifle casually stuck under his arm, in front of a house wall pockmarked with shellfire. The artful thing about it was that you couldn't see his face, just got a vague idea of his expression, because it was hidden by the smoke rising from a cigarette. His attitude was relaxed, his head in his woolly hat slightly on one side, so that you were forced to imagine his look as mocking. Apart perhaps from his fingerless gloves, he was wearing none of the accessories the war had made almost obligatory among his kind, neither trainers nor a tracksuit, not to mention sunglasses pushed up over his hair or some other extravagant article. On the contrary, in his shapeless leather jacket and baggy trousers stuck in his boots, he was more of a reminder that war is a business that has been carried on for thousands of years.

There was something unequivocal about the picture, all the more so as underneath it was written, in quotation marks but no less menacing, *Bog i Hrvati* — God and the Croats, as was made clear in the newspaper text — *Slavko, East Slavonia, December*

1991. I was trying to imagine Allmayer talking to the unknown man when Paul spoke again.

‘That must have been some meeting,’ he said, his voice suddenly sounding hoarse. ‘Just remember everything that was going on all round.’

Although of course I had glanced through the description the previous day, I only realised what he was getting at when he started talking about the prisoners who were due to be exchanged after the interview, expressing his surprise about it.

‘As far as I can remember, they hadn’t been mentioned before. It’s not clear where they suddenly appeared from.’

Supposedly the men who had been selected were to walk, arms raised and stretched out in a line, across the maize field until they reached the safety of their own people, but he didn’t really seem to believe it.

‘Either it’s not very well put, or there’s something not right about it,’ he said, as if it wasn’t important. ‘Anyway, it all comes down to the same thing in the end.’

Whatever the reason, it only took up a few lines in Allmayer’s article and it ended abruptly with his claim that he didn’t see how it finished, just heard three distinct, separate shots from a distance, a rather open ending, true, but it struck me as perverse immediately to see it as suspicious.

‘I don’t see where that gets us.’

It was quiet and I didn’t hear Paul laugh when I said that, but I noticed he had to restrain himself, given the quizzical look he suddenly turned on me.

‘Perhaps we can build something on it,’ he said, not sounding very convinced. ‘You couldn’t ask for a better starting point.’

It sounded as if he was talking about his novel again and I let him get on with it without interrupting, although I remember how incomprehensible I found his persistence, his compulsive urge to keep coming back to it at the most impossible moments. He clearly wasn’t satisfied with the atrocity of what he had read, he had to make something out of it and naturally only succeeded in doing the opposite, he couldn’t just leave it as it was, what he would have most liked, I tell myself, would have been to elaborate on it, perhaps even to invent a woman who had somehow got caught up in the turmoil of the war, best of all an American, who by her mere existence would turn a dreary Balkan report into an exciting story. Of course I’m

doing him an injustice, but when I think of the lengths to which he later went to establish a credible connection between the interview and Allmayer's murder in Kosovo, of the absurd theories he became obsessed with, which culminated in the assumption it was carried out in order to eliminate a possible prosecution witness, I stop wondering whether he really believed it or was just expecting too much of his reconstruction, because it is simply too far removed from any kind of reality.