



Greener than Eden *a novel*

Michael Kohn ● ● ● ●

Greener than Eden *a novel*

Michael Kohn



*Cormorant Books*

Copyright © 2006, Michael Kohn  
Copyright © This edition Cormorant Books Inc.  
This is a first edition.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a licence from The Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For an Access Copyright licence, visit [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca) or call toll free 1.800.893.5777.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for its publishing program. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.

Printed and bound in Canada

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Kohn, Michael S. (Michael Steven), 1965–  
Greener than Eden / Michael Kohn.

ISBN 1-896951-99-6

1. Title.

PS8621.O46G74 2006 C813'.6 C2006-904377-9

Cover design: Angel Guerra/Archetype

Cover image: Angel Guerra/Archetype

Author photo: Tanya Norman

Interior design: Tannice Goddard

Printer: Friesens

CORMORANT BOOKS INC.

215 Spadina Avenue, Studio 230, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5T 2C7

[www.cormorantbooks.com](http://www.cormorantbooks.com)

*To Tanya and our son, Isaac*

*To my parents and sister Jen for believing*

*And to everyone who's ever stooped to plant a tree.*

## CHAPTER ONE

---

WHEN I GET off the Greyhound at Betty's truck stop in Upsala, he doesn't even ask me who I am. He just picks up my duffel bag and says, "My crummy's across the street."

"Your what?"

"Boy, you're green," he says. "My truck."

"The name's Noah. Bob, right?"

"Backwards and forwards, just the way I like my people." He squeezes my hand firmly as if he can't feel through his callouses. "Green palms, but you play guitar. Southpaw ..."

I suppose the list sent from Head Office told him, and that I'm not at all versed in his lingo only verifies it, but I can't help thinking that by *green* he means a whole lot more than never having planted before — that his eyes read *no dirt under his nails. Urban refugee. Virgin to more than the woods.* But maybe that's what he needs: X-ray vision, no surprises. From what I was told at the orientation, the weather up here is enough of a variable without a camp supervisor having to worry about the sanity of twenty-to-thirty-odd people.

We toss my gear into the back seat of his crapped-out white one-ton, jump into the cab, and roll westward along the Trans-Canada — briefly hitting highway speed before we slow for the fork of a logging

road, the overloaded Prairie Schooner hitched to our ass-end swerving in and out of the sideviews. Northward across the tracks of the train I'd missed, and the woman I'd dreamed would be aboard it. Past a logging truck passing between two massive red corrugated drums to straighten out its load. Off the gravel and up a rainslick dirt road, rising with the rocks, falling with the dips, brooks, and swamps, sloshing through mud-filled ruts left by wheels so big I can't even begin to imagine the size of their machines. The sharp bends and crumbling shoulders, the bumps and blur of trees have made me carsick, so I close my eyes and listen to the last distant radio signal fade. Even the CBC's gone. Good.

Bob slides a tape into the cassette player, but every few words a bump, the sound blurs and it ejects. "Fuck. Two weeks and the damn thing's bit the dust — literally. This machine ate more road dust on our stint in Ear Falls than it did all last year."

"No spring rains back in Toronto either."

"I'd guess you've lived there all your life. The way you say it — *Trawna* — The accent's almost American."

He turns his eyes back to the road, and it's my turn to look. He's got a ski-bum's face. He's got a buzz-bomb lure — for fish too big for lakes — hanging from the rear-view mirror.

"I'd guess you're from the West Coast," I say. "Vancouver Island."

"Hornby," he says.

"Where's that?"

"An island off an island off Vancouver."

"City?"

"Island. But it's not as isolated as it sounds. ... You look tired. Want some chaw?" He reaches for a tin of chewing tobacco that's sitting on the dash. "I used it on the drive from B.C. — I had only three days to get to Ear Falls and had to go non-stop."

Yawning, I shake my head. Then I shut my eyes tight, trying to squeeze the rattling of the doors out of my head, long enough to sleep.



“Jesus H. Christ!”

The brakes squeal. I wake up airborne in the cab, the crummy sliding back from under me. I see him whole for an instant, horned with the weathered branches of some great hardwood, neck well-hung with the weight of his dewlap. My head snaps forward as my seat belt locks; we jolt to a stop and I’m snapped back. Now he’s a sea of tea-box figurines, fragmented as the glass.

I peer through a small triangle of uncracked windshield. He doesn’t even flinch, his eye a white aura frozen around a pupil dilated big as a silver dollar and so glass-like you’d think he’s been taxidermied. But he can’t hide every twitch and pulse of life, so he runs. Off the shoulder into the thick woods.

Bob’s leaning up against the steering wheel, staring straight ahead, eyes showing more white than the moose’s.

“See the rack on him? That was one big fuckin’ bull — musta weighed close to half a ton. Smoke?”

I don’t usually smoke — I chain-smoked one of the two complimentary packs of Daily Mail I was given in jail, traded the other for two chocolate bars and quit when I got out. Now I take my first smoke since February in trembling fingers. Bob lights mine, then his.

Grimacing, he blows a jet of smoke. “So it was your head that fucked my windshield.”

“What?”

“You’re bleeding.” He hands me a wad of napkins. “Feel dizzy?”

I daub at the warmth trickling down my forehead. The last time I really bled, I’d been bludgeoned from a Caterpillar bulldozer with a mounted-police baton, an armoured horse rearing up over my stunned, limp body, a stranger lying at my side slipping her hand into mine and mumbling *we shall live in peace* — or some other comforting lie — through her own blood. The windshield may have even reopened the same wound.

“I think I’d better dress that before we move on,” Bob says. He hops down from the cab, reaches behind the seat, and pulls out a large unripe lime-coloured industrial first aid kit. “Hey, come on, we haven’t got all day.”

I get out and sit on the bumper. He shuffles the part through my hair as if grooming out lice. I wince where he stops, clenching my teeth as he trails a peroxide-soaked cotton ball through the wound.

“Damned flies,” he says, fanning his hand over my head.

“They don’t seem too bad.”

“They will in a week or two, once they’ve chased the rest of the animal kingdom out to the road. Before the season’s through, their great-great grandchildren will be hatching to get their fill. That’s why you’ve got to plant fast. The instant you stop, you’re history. So, what’s drawn you up here — I mean, aside from the two greens?”

“The two greens?”

“Ma nature and money, or were you sent?”

I shrug. “The fishing.”

“Oh I see. Natural wealth. ... You know, you’re just about as thick as the forest. But ten springs ago I boated a kid almost as green ’n even quieter ’n you to a contract I was tree-runner on way up the Campbell River, and he’s still with me now.”

“And he still plants?”

“No, but he may be training you how. Lyndon’s finally mellowed enough to make foreman. Man. ... He was so bottled up his first season, it’s as if he ran on nothing but heat ’n steam. But the forest broke him eventually, and it’s gonna break you too, sooner or later. My advice is, don’t resist it.”

He cocks his head as if listening to the sky, then paws a buzzing insect from the air. Holding it by the wings, he sorts through its kicking legs and plucks out its suckle shaft. “Disarmament,” he smiles, dropping the mosquito to the road, and for a minute I’m left wondering if he knows more about my leanings than he lets on. But then he reaches into the first aid kit and tosses me two flat packages, each

two inches square. One's a gauze compress for my head, the other's for my wallet, for my other head.

I look into his face, all a-grin.

"Thanks, but I don't think I'll be needing both of these."

"Gotta girlfriend back home?"

"No, and I plan on keeping it that way up here."

He laughs and shakes his head. "How many priests have I heard make that vow? The locals say it gets so lonely in the bush even the bears start to look good ..."

I toss the Shields back into his hands. "Ever done more than look?"

His face sours. "Never had to. Every camp I've ever run or been in has had its share of women. And I've had my own." He shuts the safe back into the first aid kit. "Well, at least you'll know where to find these when your mind's changed."

"If."

"Whatever." He swats a mosquito that has landed on his wrist. "Let's just hope that none of these flying fuckers can spread the fucking plague, or we're all history."

We get back into the crummy and tear off for camp, Bob hunched over the wheel, squinting through the tiny clear triangle of unshattered windshield, driving faster in spite of the moose to make up for lost time. Cresting a hill, we swerve left along an elevated ridge that twists and winds like a snake's spine through the forest. The spherical compass perched on the dash rolls around in its watery shell: west northwest, a few hills ahead, storm clouds piled up thickly and stalled, cast dark shadows and sheets of grey over the rocky, uneven landscape. Suddenly, the ground opens up into a vast stretch of stripped land, small logs felled and unclaimed forming a thatchwork over the yellow soil, quaking aspen left to grow in small clumps — solitary oases — and no other living tree in sight until the edge of paradise, wherever that is. Then I see the charred wood, signs of scorching.

"Forest fire?"

“Slashburned clear-cut — all ours.”

“You mean we’ve got to plant that?”

Bob nods. “Looks like more than it is, though. Should only take us a couple of weeks with every crew in the camp in there ...” He eyes me for a very full second. “Looks like the Bomb was dropped, eh?”

Looks like the ground just opened up and swallowed the forest. Looks like a hurricane passed through, the biggest windfall. My stomach sinks with the crummy into the first spatters of rain.

Through the small triangle of uncracked windshield, a lone figure — too far off to tell if it’s approaching or walking away from us — is kicking up puffs of dust through the dampening surface of the road.

“Probably a surveyor,” Bob says. “Or prospector.”

But there isn’t a vehicle of any kind in sight.

Bob slows down. The figure is a woman. She is walking toward us, south, maybe for the highway; stumbling under the weight of an overstuffed backpack and dragging a duffel bag in the dirt. Her shock of dark hair is tangled and frosted with dust blown from the already bone-dry road. Rivulets of dried blood cut and criss-cross her dusted cheeks and mud-smear neck.

“Well, well,” Bob smirks. “There’s your bride, Frankenstein.”

I lean forward, squinting: her eyes are almost swollen shut. “She’s been in an accident. Or beaten up.”

“Beaten up, alright. By blackflies.”

“I thought you said it’s still too early for flies.”

“Normally, it would be. But the temperature hit a hundred and five Fahrenheit, May first, broke the ice off all the lakes. The bugs might sense a drought coming, and they sure as hell smelled Miss Ten Rounds here. Shit. She looks like she’s been on an all-night bush-crash.”

Bob rolls down his window as we roll to a stop. “Need a lift somewhere?”

“A job,” the strange woman says. She holds up the long-bladed shovel she’s been dragging along with her other hand. “I had to leave

my camp. ... They weren't feeding us very well."

"I'll have to talk it over with Head Office," Bob says. "I don't know if we can take you on but you're welcome to stay the night. Squeeze in."

The woman opens the rear door of the cab and jams her shovel between my gear and the seat back. Then she pokes her swollen face in through my window. "Got any more room in that trailer?"

Bob shakes his head. "Your shit'll have to ride with us up front. No matter. It's only another ten k."

I slide my saddle-sore ass out of the crummy and help her stack her overweight pack and duffel in the space behind the stick shift. Then I slide back in, shove up against her gear as tight as my frame will allow, squeeze my legs together, but can't make enough room.

"You'll have to sit on his lap," Bob says to the woman. She hesitates, then climbs in, hunching her head and back under the windshield as she sits on my kneecaps, just able to pull her toes in enough for me to close the door. The crummy jerks forward and up the next hill, and she half slides, half falls back into my chest, never moving the cool green warning iris from the corner of her slit eye.



As we're rolling to a stop, the woman, who's been perched on my lap for the last ten k's, opens the door and stumbles into a run for the boat launch at the bottom of the sloping grass road. Where she kneels to wash her face, the lake is so smooth I can see the rings and ripples of raindrops expand from their moments of impact, intersect and continue.

Bob rolls his eyes. "Long blade and overly concerned with cleanliness and godliness and god knows shaving her legs. She's greener than green, I tell ya. Probably why she didn't survive her last camp." He hops out and whistles to several wet figures huddled in the doorway of a small, square shack knocked together from two-by-fours

and tarps. “I need a few strong bucks over here to help me unload the kitchen.”

“I guess by buck you don’t mean doe,” a woman answers.

A tall man with short, fair hair ducks inside, the rest pretend not to hear. Bob links his thumbs through his belt loops and curses under his breath. “Jaegs! Aleron! Daniel! Stop fuckin’ the dog or we’ll never get camp up. And Mitra, you know I don’t mean swinging dicks when I say bucks.”

The tall man peaks out, grinning, then ambles toward us; a short, tanned man with tightly curled hair and a luxuriant moustache follows, a third, with long black hair braided down his back, drags along behind him.

Bob turns to me. “We’re raising the mess soon. When you hear the horn, drop whatever you’re doing and hustle back here.”

“Where should I pitch my tent?”

“Anywhere in the woods is fine, only not too far from camp central. Lyndon doesn’t like having to go tromping all over the bush every morning, dragging out the dog-fuckers who missed wake-up call.”

The drizzle turns to rain. I slide into my Wetskins, grab my backpack and tent, and cut through the bustle of construction: two men in varsity jerseys, each in a hole he’s dug about three feet into the ground, and a group of women unrolling a thick piece of vinyl — big, round and striped as a parachute. The rain starts hammering down, so I pull up my hood and hustle across the treeline, bogging down in the moss carpet that covers the forest floor. I won’t be able to run here, but I won’t need to waste my breath on my air mattress either: this bed will make a softer one than I’ve ever had.

The forest is a maze of tents, sleek cycling tents that sleep only one, geodesic domes of all sizes up to six-man and in various shades of blue, green and red, and two-man mountain tents — the kind advertised as “bomb-proof” for their ability to withstand hurricane-force winds, though I’d guess that the radioactive fallout of a distant blast,

say in Thunder Bay, would make short work of such uv-sensitive nylon. I pitch mine, a Canadian Tire pup tent, on a small plateau overlooking the lake. I anchor the pegs, which don't hold well in moss, with rocks and fallen limbs. Finally, I lash the fly-strings around two saplings, toss my pack into the tent, crawl in after it to unroll my sleeping bag and organize the rest of my scant belongings: the rolled up air mattress I'll use as a pillow until the moss is too beaten down to cushion my back against the cold, hard ground (a process I hope to speed up with the help of a soft, warm woman); the maglite, which can be converted into an electric candle for reading books or the face of a lover; a candle that can be blown out in case the nights are cold and lonely; and my travel alarm. Until the very last moment before I was supposed to be boarding the train, this was the only time I carried with me because it could be folded up and slipped into a pocket where I wouldn't have to be faced with it.

The watch! I pull back the sleeve of my rain jacket to check for damage from our run-in with the moose; its unblemished black face and gold hands and intersecting golden dials stare back at me. A tiny dial at 9 o'clock to tick off the seconds, the measure of minutes at 3, and circling its entire Swiss-made face, a telemeter for gauging distances. A watch that, ironically, made me miss my train.

I was booting it down the long platform of Union Station, a steward urgently waving me on from the rear gate of the now-rolling train, and my father struggling to catch me.

"Noah — wait!" he gasped.

"Hurry," I said. "All I gave you to carry was my guitar and you can't keep up? You should cut back on those butts."

"I have something to give you."

"There's no time. The Trans-Canada runs once a day."

"Then you'll have to miss it."

"No way."

"Please, Noah, it's important. I'd meant to give it to you earlier, on your birthday, but —"

“But what?”

“I guess I wasn’t quite ready to give it up. Besides, things were especially tense between us then, and I was waiting for the right moment.”

“Now? You have my crew’s post office box in Thunder Bay?”

“Noah, it can’t be mailed.”

“Who says? For Chrissake, Dad — are you trying to make me miss the train or what?”

“You should know me better than to think that I’d stoop so low,” he barked at my heels.

The train began to accelerate, but we’d just about pulled even with the last door.

“Let’s go!” The steward gesticulated wildly.

“Just give me the guitar,” I said, grabbing for the case.

Father hung on. “I hate to spoil a surprise, but I don’t think you should trust your grandfather’s watch to Canada Post.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, watching as the train passed the end of the platform and receded down the rails.

Now I dig into the back pocket of my jeans for the note that accompanied Father’s gift. Plain white paper. Blue ink. “A belated Happy 20th Noah. I hope this watch will see you through your storm as it saw me through mine.”

I’m not sure he hadn’t planned all along to derail my departure, or at least delay it. Once I was gone, there’d only be Mom and him in their cookie-cutter oversized suburban house in a cookie-cutter suburb of a suburb. Though he must have known that at this point in our lives, nothing could make up for his absences, I don’t think he’s beyond trying to hold onto an opportunity that has already passed. He’s been enchanted with this watch from the time his father first showed him its golden hands and its one special function; passing it down must have been hard for him, as much for the new life it marked for each of us as for the giving up of a treasured heirloom, the only possession that he’s truly coveted.

I wrap the watch in the note, tie it with an elastic band, and slip it into the waterproof map-pouch on my pack, where it will remain for the season. A horn blares: the mess will be ready for raising. ... I struggle to extract myself from the living form I've cast in the moss beneath my tent, and ponder the meaning behind my father's cryptic note, wondering why he never told me that story.

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE



“... [Kohn’s] poetic descriptions capture wonderfully the logged landscapes where Noah’s crew does its reforestations work, and even the most urban reader will become aware of the Zen aspect of replanting forests by hand.”

*THIS Magazine*

“Tree planting is a rite of passage for so many young Canadians, it’s a bit surprising that it has rarely been treated as such by the country’s writers. On that score alone, Michael Kohn’s first novel breaks new ground, but his grab-bag of eclectic characters is what makes *Greener than Eden* such a satisfying read.”

*Outpost*



CORMORANT BOOKS INC.  
215 Spadina Avenue, Suite 230.  
Toronto ON M5T 3C7