

Life's a Beach!

ON HANLAN'S POINT

by Jeffrey Luscombe



Summers in Toronto can be blistering hot.

To find relief, Torontonians have been ferrying over to Hanlan's Point on the Toronto Island since the 1800s. And though it has only been designated officially clothing-optional by the city of Toronto since 2002, unofficially, it has been a traditional spot for nude sunbathing—especially gay men—for decades.

Now back in the day, (when the risk of being charged with public nudity was all part of the fun) there was nothing but the relentless sun on the sand at Hanlan's Point (and perhaps the occasional rustling in the bushes along the sand-line); however, today those looking to enjoy their summer sun in the buff, can do so in a little more comfort than those in bygone years thanks to Randy Mulrooney, owner of Life's a Beach, and his lounge chairs and beach umbrellas.

Originally from Newfoundland, Mulrooney has spent the last twenty-six years in his adopted city of Toronto. And, like many a gay Torontontian man, every summer he enjoyed visiting Hanlan's Point. "I always loved the sun," Mulrooney says. "And being from Newfoundland, I come from water."

It was while vacationing on one of the many sunny beaches down south like Puerto Vallarta and South Beach that Mulrooney discovered the convenience and comfort of renting lounge chairs and umbrellas right on the beach. So when Hanlan's point "officially went nude" Mulrooney's entrepreneurial spirit meshed with his love of the sun and he asked himself, could the same sort of chair-rental business he had seen in Puerto Vallarta and South Beach work in Toronto?

"I called the city's Parks, Forestry and Recreation department and asked what it takes to start up on Hanlan's Point," says Mulrooney. After submitting a detailed business plan and revenue forecast, Mulrooney and Life's a Beach was approved for a one year trial. Today Mulrooney and his five part-time employees are celebrating their thirteenth summer at Hanlan's Point, one of only two official clothing-optional beaches in Canada.

"It's a great place to drop the façade," he says. "Once your clothes comes off your inhibitions go too. People meet each other."

And what started as a predominately gay beach has undergone a bit of a demographic shift over the years. "It's been interesting to watch," Mulrooney says. He estimates that during his first year in business about 90-95% of people on the beach were gay while today gay men might account for 60-70%. "But more and more people are coming. On weekends we can have fifteen hundred people on the beach and seventy-five boats in the water."

However, it seems that the advent of technology has lowered the number of folks choosing to fully strip down. "Generally less people are nude," he says. "Now with video cameras on phones, it's dropped to 40-50% range. Women are more hesitant to go naked; they mostly go topless. A lot of guys don't care."

Mulrooney charges a flat rate for the day: \$7 for a lounge chair and \$12 for an umbrella plus a deposit. "I often run out," says Mulrooney. "Chairs sell out, umbrellas sell out. People need protection." But because his chairs are found on the "gayer side" of the beach, Mulrooney lets straight couples know that they will be sitting among gay men before they rent a chair—just so there won't be any surprises. Few, he said, ever seem to mind.

And though there may still be some gay cruising happening, for Mulrooney, Hanlan's Point is about more. "It's the camaraderie," he says. As an example, Mulrooney recalled the day a lesbian knitting club came by, rented some chairs and umbrellas, and knit in the nude all day. "It lets people experience new freedom. It's not sexual. It's about freedom. And the island is a beautiful place to be," Mulrooney says. "The water is so clear, you can see little schools of baby fish. In fact, among all of Toronto's many beaches, Hanlan's Point



often boasts the best water due to the beach being farther in Lake Ontario, away from the runoff of the city. It is not uncommon to find Hanlan's Point open for swimming when Toronto's other beaches are closed for poor water quality in the summer.

However, doing business on an island is sometimes challenging. Inclement weather can sweep in quickly and sudden down drafts have turned a beach umbrella into a twisted mess. Last year, Mulrooney was the victim of vandalism when thirty of his lounge chairs were destroyed when they were intentionally set ablaze. Though miscreants were ultimately caught for other vandalism on the island, no one was ever charged with destroying Mulrooney's chairs.

But after thirteen years he still loves it. "It still amazes me how many people don't know that there is a nude beach in Toronto. People say, 'I never knew that was out there!' I still think it's one of the best kept hidden secrets in Toronto," he says.

Life's a Beach hours are daily, weather permitting, 10am-5:45pm starting July 1 until Labour Day. He's open weekends during May and June and after Labour Day until the end of September (lifesabeachtoronto@rogers.com).

Jeffrey Luscombe was born in Hamilton, Ontario Canada. He holds a BA and MA in English from the University of Toronto. He attended The Humber College School for Writers where he was mentored by writers Nino Ricci and Lauren B. Davis. He has had fiction published in *Chelsea Station*, *Zeugma Literary Journal*, and *filling Station Magazine*. In 2010 he was shortlisted for the Prism International Fiction Prize. He was a contributor to the anthology *Truth or Dare* (Slash Books Inc. 2011) and just published his first novel, *Shirts and Skins*. He lives in Toronto with his husband Sean.

