

# Who are you staring at?

**Sit. Stare. Fall in love. LEAH RUMACK takes a long, hard look at the latest speed-dating fad**

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'Imagine entering a mood-lit room full of appealing singles,' coos the posting on Craigslist.

"You pair up with one of them, but instead of yammering about your job, you sit for two minutes and gaze deeply into your partner's eyes, without talking, over alluring world beats. Then you switch . . . and switch again until you have peered right into the souls of 15 new people in a single night."

It's the latest in novelty dating in Toronto: eye gazing parties.

"I started it as a way for people to end up in long-term relationships," laughs Michael Ellsberg, a book editor and salsa instructor who started the parties in New York, "but people were just hooking up."

"It's actually a deeper connection," insists Toronto host Fernando Lopez, a relationship coach and founder of Alliance for Avant-garde Relationships. "It's less superficial when you are gazing at each other."

A roomful of single men doesn't really scare me, unless they are all wearing pleated pants. What scares me is the completely gruesome thought of having to 1) sit still and 2) stare into someone's eyes. This is a girl who couldn't even bear her boyfriend gazing at her all moony-eyed.

I practice the night before with a friend. The digital clock behind his head crawls miserably. I last 12 seconds. One work colleague recommends that I write words on my eyelids before I go, which is more helpful than my other colleague, who spends the day calling me "man-starer."

I arrive at Latinada Tapas Bar for Toronto's eye-gazing debut and follow a picture of an eye scrawled in red marker. A group of fairly cute men and women in their 20s and 30s are milling about looking shyly into their cocktails. The men are on one side of the room and the women are on the other. Apparently, this is not a requirement, just a sudden instinctual throwback to grade eight.

People start to mingle and chat.

I go up to a man deep breathing with his eyes closed at the table.

"Hi, my name is Leah . . ."

"Personally," he says, "I was not going to talk to anyone before the event. Now you're talking to me."

The group sets up on either side of the table to start the gazing. "I'm so nervous!" one woman titters. "Should I spit out my gum? Will it be snapping?"

One guy is wearing tinted sunglasses. "Hey, what's with buddy wearing sunglasses?" I shout. "You can't gaze with sunglasses on!"

The woman next to me pokes me and whispers, "He's legally blind."

The gazing begins.

My first cohort and I keep giggling.

Stop talking, he mouths to me.

I'm not talking.

Yes you are.

I'm going to tell your mother that you're here.

It's the longest two minutes of my life.

But I start to get it when the next man flirts maddeningly -- no licking or blowing, just a general look in his eyes -- making me blush. I have slightly different experiences with the next several gazers. They're probably not guys I would normally end up talking to, but you do feel a little . . . funny . . . staring into someone's eyes.

And as ice breakers go, it's even better than charades. At the break, the entire room is talking.

"I felt really connected to you," one guy tells me sweetly. I don't have the heart to tell him I had been pondering risotto recipes.

By the end of the night, three business cards have been thrust at me, and I've been invited to two parties and a spoken-word performance.

As I make my way to the subway, I think that I hear a song in the air. Could it be?

It's Stare Way to Heaven.