

I can smell my own eyeballs burning. It's like someone's lit the barbecue to do chops, only it's my eyes that are cooking – or, more correctly, being lasered. My eyelids have been taped back, and I've had more drops than a rabbit that's being used to test shampoo. I want to leap out of the comfy reclined bed and leg it to the door, but instead I stay completely still. This is probably one of the more counterintuitive moments of my life – a proper Room 101 experience for which I blame Claudia Winkleman.

'Don't think about it – just do it,' said Winkleman, a woman once so myopically challenged it is astounding she was ever allowed out without a white stick. 'It is life-changing and you won't regret it. Forget about a new handbag – it's all about new eyes.' She called me again two days later. 'Have you booked yet?' She was pretty insistent. 'Look, I'm going to book the appointment for you. Then you can't bloody back out.'

And so it happened that I found myself sitting in the office of Julian Stevens, one of this country's finest eye surgeons, listening to him extol the virtues of bespoke laser eye surgery. 'Each person's world is slightly different,' he said. 'Their occupation, hobbies, interests – they're all individual. The idea of just having 20/20 vision is now outdated. What is good vision for one person may not be ideal for another.'

Not satisfied with being able to read a restaurant menu and recognise their husband at 20 paces in a poorly lit room, the glamorous, discerning patient wants more from their eyes. In a competitive world where only the fast, slick and focused survive, bespoke vision is the latest way of staying ahead of the herd. We have whiter teeth, firmer breasts, flatter stomachs – why not sharper eyes?

'For a footballer,' continued Stevens, 'if their vision is only average, they will do very well in bright daylight conditions on a Saturday, but in bad floodlighting it's a different story.' And it's not just sports stars. Numerous celebrities have lain on Stevens's padded chair, among them an Oscar-winning actress, movie stars (one of whom wanted to be able to read his stocks and shares without specs), film directors, comedy writers, Britt Ekland, Frederick Forsyth and members of the Royal Family.

Bespoke patients' needs can be quite exacting, though. A racing driver who wanted precision peripheral vision to see who was trying to overtake him. A mountaineer who wanted to climb Everest. 'The most specific was someone who plays the organ in a candlelit church who asked for their vision set to focus at 1.25 metres,' said Stevens. In some cases, however, bespoke vision is not just life-changing – it can be life-saving: 'A soldier needs excellent distance vision, particularly at night, because it keeps you alive if you see something first.' So Stevens has fighter pilots and members of the special forces sitting in his waiting room, as well as people whose jobs

put them at high risk of abduction, as apparently the first thing a kidnapper will take from you are your specs.

Me? I'm not after night sight, footballer sight or even second sight. My request is simple 'hack vision' – I want to be able to read the *Daily Mail* website without squinting and to spot a free drink at the end of the bar. Giles Coren just wanted to be able to see his wife during sex, so he opted for simple 20/20 'lover vision'. 'She is very attractive,' he said. 'It seemed a shame not to be able to see her.' And after her surgery, India Knight said: 'The plants, flowers, the detail on buildings and, most thrillingly, brickwork! I realise this last one sounds insane but, after decades of extreme myopia, brickwork is AMAZING. Oh, and grass – individual blades.' And Claudia? She was just relieved to be able to see the autocue at last.

Fortunately for me in the chair, the Lasik (as the laser procedure is known) is mercifully quick. It takes 10 seconds to create a flap in the cornea, which is then flipped open, and then another 30 seconds for the burning laser to correct your sight. The flap is replaced and a protective contact lens is put into the eye, only to be removed a day later. The results are immediate – as soon as I stood up I could see the clock on the wall in sharp focus. You could walk straight out of the building and onto the set of *Parkinson*, as one of Stevens's patients once did, although you may be a little shellshocked. The next day, my eyes had healed – I drove to my check-up the following morning.

I can now find my crying child in the middle of the night without shuffling about blindly feeling for my specs. I even packed to go away for the weekend with a half-empty wash bag, devoid of packets of lenses and solutions. One of the greatest pleasures was cancelling my standing order for contacts at the bank that I'd had on a monthly direct debit for 18 years.

As with any surgery, there are possible complications, the most common being dry eyes and haloes, where lights appear blurred and fuzzy at night. 'This normally recovers over three to six months,' Stevens assured me.

But the results are mindblowing. So much so that Stevens has found himself in a few tight spots. 'I was approached at one point by some members of the professional gambling community who had worked out that vision makes a big difference to the outcome of certain sports. So I was asked to divulge

which sportspeople I had treated, as it could influence the gamblers' betting – but obviously such information is completely confidential.'

And the most popular request he's had? Golf vision, of course. It seems the company executive, the captain of industry and the multinational director will stop at nothing to improve their handicap: 'A lot of men want to beat their friends and colleagues – and they will do anything they can to achieve that.' □

Visit julianstevens.co.uk for further details.

