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ELLEBODY

One day, I was packing for an overseas business trip when it suddenly occurred to me that I was living my life on the edge. No, I wasn't planning a detour through Burma or even attempting to smuggle an extra tube of hand lotion in my carry-on luggage. My jeopardy was travelling with one single pair of peepers. I've been nearsighted and astigmatic since my teens, so every waking hour involved wearing spectacles.

VISION MISSION

From four eyes back down to two, this was my journey to 20/20 vision. TEXT: RITA SILVAN

The realization that I would be handicapped if something unfortunate happened to them came as a shock. I pictured a typical business trip—interviewing a fashion designer, a celebrity or the CEO of a luxury cosmetics company or making small talk at some swanky cocktail party—with a big X through the whole itinerary. Suddenly, I'd be at the mercy of strangers to bundle me on a plane and ship me home, same-day delivery.

My previously carefree attitude toward packing took a dramatic turn to disaster prevention. Now on top of the little emergency extras—tampons, Aspirin, Band-Aids—I added contact lenses, contact lens solution, a contact lens holder, an extra pair of prescription eyeglasses, non-prescription sunglasses (for when I wore contact lenses) and prescription sunglasses. The eyeglasses cases felt like a stack of bricks in my hand luggage—and forget about the luxury of bringing a hardcover to read on the plane. At best, there was only room for a slim copy of *The New Yorker*, and tough luck if it happened to feature a 10,000-word story on baseball.

Because I never felt comfortable wearing contact lenses, I wore my glasses everywhere. Black-tie dinner? I was there in my black, figure-bugging losey Miyake gown, accessorized with office-girl glasses. Beach vacation in the Bahamas? "Sure, I'd love to go for a swim—as long as you lead me by the hand to the water's edge." Ashtanga yoga class? One more downward dog with my glasses pivoting off the tip of my nose and I was throwing in the towel.

I had been contemplating laser eye surgery for more than 10 years. Many of my friends had had it done right from the get-go and loved the results, but I was leery. I had also heard scary stories of people who needed multiple surgeries to correct botched jobs, as well as those who suffered from night-vision problems afterwards. Anyway, I've never been what you would call an "early adopter." (I still don't know how to download digital photos on my Mac.) From time to time, I would research options online but would always wilt whenever I saw words like "microkeratome," which describes a hand-held oscillating steel blade that is used to create a corneal flap so that the surgeon can reshape the cornea underneath.

A recent scientific breakthrough suddenly made the idea of laser eye surgery more palatable for a big chicken like me. Called High Definition Vision with iLASIK using the IntraLase laser system, this blade-free laser procedure

offers more precise and controlled vision correction with safer results, eliminating the potential risks associated with the older microkeratome blade system.

Another innovation is something called Monovision LASIK. Although it sounds a bit cyborg-like, this surgery—which is geared to people over 40—eliminates or reduces a person's dependence on reading glasses. The procedure involves adjusting one eye to see things up close and correcting the other eye for distance vision. The brain quickly integrates the two types of visual input to create one coherent image.

Finally, I decided to take the plunge.

On the day of the surgery, I was pretty stressed out. In the waiting area, I nervously munched on chocolate chip cookies while I watched the post-op patients check themselves out at the front desk. I felt reassured when I noticed no one being wheeled out on a stretcher, no one clutching her head in pain, no sobbing and no bloody bandages. A nurse, perhaps seeing the tray of cookies in front of me disappear, offered me a Valium, which I gratefully accepted. Then I was led into a semi-private lounge, where I was given a calm-inducing shoulder and back massage.

By the time Dr. Sheldon Herzig, the surgeon, called me in, I was completely ready to place myself in his care. Dr. Herzig has performed more than 50,000 surgeries—but more than just his experience, his gentle and confident manner inspires trust. I believe that, no matter how

ELLEBODY

EYE BRIGHT

Dr. Sheldon Herzig is the medical director and chief surgeon of the Herzig Eye Institute. He has developed techniques and instruments that are used worldwide. His clinic treats patients from around the world, including elite golf and tennis professionals and Hollywood celebrities.

When did you decide to specialize in this area of medicine? "I've always enjoyed being at the forefront of technology. People with very strong prescriptions feel crippled by that fact, and I thought it would be nice if we could eliminate that for them. I found that the emotional impact on people [having improved vision] is amazing."

Can you share any stories? "It has opened up careers for people, like for those who want to go into the military or become policemen. For some, their vision problems meant they couldn't enjoy athletics; for others, they've endured life-threatening experiences, such as being in a fire, because they couldn't see."

Will there be another big leap in laser vision correction, as there was with High Definition Vision with iLASIK using the IntraLase laser system [the blade-free laser technology that eliminates the potential risks associated with the older microkeratome blade system]? "There will always be advances that allow you to treat a greater variety of patients, but you have to decide how bothered you are about glasses and determine when is the right time to improve your vision."

One indicator of a great clinic is a low re-treatment rate. What's yours? "On average, five percent is considered low; at our clinic, it's two percent."

For more information, contact the Herzig Eye Institute at 1-888-782-8000 or visit www.herzig-eye.com.

how many degrees or awards a physician may have (and this doctor has plenty of both), you have to trust in that person to get the best results.

The surgery itself was remarkably quick and utterly painless. When it was over, I walked out, popped a pair of sunglasses on (to protect my eyes while they were light-sensitive) and headed home. That evening, I glanced at the pair of eyeglasses that I had worn daily for the past three years—it already felt like they belonged to someone else.

My vision continued to improve over the next few weeks. I should probably get a pair of reading glasses because I spend so many hours on my computer,

although I've had no problems doing my job without them. You would think that after wearing glasses for more than 30 years, I would retain certain gestures, like pushing the frames back up the bridge of my nose, but that hasn't happened. The only time I think about wearing glasses is when I leave the house in the morning to go to work and feel like I've forgotten something. Working in the fashion industry, one often hears people touting the transformative effects of the season's latest—something along the lines of "These pants will change your life!" I'm doubtful about the trousers, but I can say that seeing without glasses really does the trick. □