

NIP AND TUCK, DARLING?

When Craig McLean's wife Donna said she wanted plastic surgery, he was haunted by visions of trout pouts and the Bride of Wildenstein. Would she still be the woman he married?

PHOTOGRAPHS John Angerson



am running along Harley Street, chasing after my wife. She's ditched her coffee, the better to get to the clinic on time, but I'm still clutching mine.

As I race to catch up, cappuccino foam spilling onto my sleeve, I catch sight of the services offered by practices operating behind shiny black doors on this, London's – the world's – pre-eminent medical mile.

Breast, groin and hernia. Ear, nose and throat. Urology, oncology, allergy. Enlargement, reduction, tightening. Inside handsome townhouses, behind small, perfectly polished brass nameplates, doctors and specialists by the dozen dispense nipping, tucking, improving.

I hear a snatch of conversation between two pedestrians. "I said to him, 'But the skin is so dry,'" says a white-haired, paper-faced woman in furry boots and funny hat. "He said, 'Well, it could be an allergic reaction.'" A liveried Mini is parked in the street, offering "Permanent pain-free laser hair-removal for ALL skin types". On this cloudy day my wife and I appear to be the only people on the street not wearing huge, face-concealing sunglasses.

Eventually my wife reaches her destination. Another black door, more brass nameplates. This drowsy clinic is called Harley Street Aesthetics. A courier sits in the hallway. He is carrying a red cooler box. It could be carrying vials of liposuctioned fat, or vials of Botox. Or a Thai takeaway. After all, it's nearly lunchtime.

Welcome to Harley Street, where they'll suck the excess blub from your hips at a price, but discreetly so. Their lipos are sealed. If plastic surgery is your bag, this is the place: moneyed, rarefied and utterly, utterly terrifying. What on Earth are we doing here?

This morning, my wife is going under the knife. She is having her eyelids sliced open, some stuff removed, sutures added, then stitches added (what's the difference between sutures and stitches?), then huge, face-concealing sunglasses surgically grafted on to her bruised and bloodied visage. She seems calm at the prospect. I am, shall we say, less so.

I never imagined I'd have a wife – the kind of wife – who'd plump for wrinkle-smoothing injections (on offer in your local hairdresser's right now), far less undergo plastic surgery.

Donna is a former media exec who has always valued her looks and fashion sense. Yet as a run-off-her-feet mum of three, she's had

other priorities of late. Since sacrificing her career six years ago to care for our growing brood, she's become – had to become – less in thrall to the tyranny of seasonal fashion trends. She's been scornful of the smattering of yummy mummies we see around our North London neighbourhood who've seemingly capitulated to the bludgeon of Botox.

But ever since she first floated the possibility of having "a little work done", my feverish – you might say childish – brain has gone into overdrive. Visions of Leslie Ash's trout pout, Jordan's space hoppers, the Bride of Wildenstein and daft, vain, posho ladies-who-lunch have all loomed large in my mind.

I like my wife the way nature intended her to be. She's as beautiful to me now, at the age of 45, as she was when we married ten years ago. She manages to take care of herself – while also taking care of our home and our children – via strategic visits to yoga, the salon, net-a-porter.com and the jogging circuit round our local park. She's gorgeous. Job done, right?

BEFORE



I'm fearful. Will Donna get addicted to surgery? Might she take a toyboy lover?

So I'm happy with her as she is, and fearful of how she might end up. So she has this operation, and it looks great, and she feels better – but what next? Chemical face peel? Knee lift? A toe job? Will she become addicted to plastic surgery, and will this be the financial death of us? Might the new improved Donna take a toned-up toyboy lover? Or am I just being an idiot? A selfish, unfeeling, narrow-minded, old-fashioned, patriarchal idiot.

For Donna's wish to submit to the scalpel is, to be scrupulously fair, not about vanity. Well, it is a bit, and she'd be the first to admit it. But her prime motivation is health.

Donna has always had heavy eyelids. Her mother and grandmother were both afflicted in the same way. But it got to the stage where it was actually impairing her vision. She would complain that she had to tilt her head to see properly. Her heavy eyes were dragging her down, in every sense. When the *Times* photographer arrived to take the "before" portraits accompanying this article, she was utterly traumatised by the initial pictures she

saw on his laptop. "I look like Myra Hindley," Donna said, face as downcast as her eye-bags.

Then, late last year, Donna's mother mentioned that her grandmother had actually done something about her own eyes – she'd undergone plastic surgery on the NHS in the Seventies.

It got Donna thinking. After some soul-searching, and via consultations with both our local GP and at Moorfields Eye Hospital – who diagnosed impaired peripheral vision – she decided to take the plunge. She opted against one consultant's suggestion, a full-scale brow-lift. I was relieved – I'd already seen pictures of Jonny Lee Miller playing the scarred 'n' stitched monster in Danny Boyle's *Frankenstein* at the National Theatre. Then a friend told her about a new technique developed by a charismatic young Harley Street plastic surgeon. He called it the TBT EyeLift: the Turn Back Time EyeLift.

His name was Dr Dirk

Kremer. Yes, really. My earlier relief gave way to apprehension. He sounded like a dashing surgeon-cum-playboy, half *Boogie Nights* and half *Nip/Tuck*. Was the groovy, handsome and no doubt fantastically wealthy Dr Dirk about to whisk out Donna's eye-fat, then whisk her off to a pool party in Miami? Should I be getting a gynaecomastia job – a man-boob reduction – just in case?

Like I said, I wasn't thinking straight.

But after her first meeting with Dr Dirk, Donna was reassured and so, subsequently, was I. She thought he was great, but not in that way. Plus, ultimately, surely anything was less worrying than "plastic surgery on the NHS in the Seventies". Can you imagine?

Now the week of Donna's appointment at the clinic has come around. She told the kids yesterday. The two youngest freaked out. The prospect of Mummy undergoing an operation was troubling enough (maybe that "Myra Hindley" look wasn't so appealing either). But what about when she came home, bloodied, bruised and blind? Would she be a heavily bandaged weirdo hidden in her darkened room for days? Was Mummy going to become a mummy, like something out of *Scotchy-Do?*

The eldest daughter, 15 going on 25, was more sanguine about the prospect of a horror-show Miss Havisham. So much so that my teenager's unfazed reaction to the prospect of plastic surgery did rather trouble me. Aaaaanyway. One paranoid episode at a time.

I'm sitting in a café off Harley Street. I'm drinking another coffee while my wife is having her eyes gutted.

I left her in Dr Dirk Kremer's basement operating theatre, naked but for her pants, a crepe-paper gown and hat. Dr Dirk is German, muscled, playful, very charismatic and rather flamboyant.

He hustled about, making jokes, spelling out the risks – little things such as a skull-like hollow eye, damaged tear ducts, blindness, etc, etc – but only because he's legally obliged to. His TBT Eyelift, he insisted, is a very safe procedure. "We should have a major outcome with the least risk, the least change," he said. It's about "fat rescue" rather than the more traditional "fat removal". As he put it, that fat is meant to be there, to protect the eyeball from banging into the skull. His procedure tightens the membrane, thereby securing the fat in the orbital rim. He is an impassioned perfectionist, utterly professional, completely in charge, and brilliant at putting Donna at ease.

This operation on eyelids is called blepharoplasty. It is costing £3,000, and is the second most popular plastic surgery operation in the UK, after breast augmentation. Last year, 5,127 women underwent the procedure, up 7 per cent on the year before, according to figures from the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons. BAAPS members also did

9,418 breast augmentations (and, yes, we've all heard the "baps" jokes). Overall in 2010, British women underwent 34,413 procedures carried out by Association surgeons (who amount to one in three of the total number of UK surgeons), an increase of 5 per cent on 2009. Recession be damned. Economic cuts, clearly, aren't blunting surgical ones. Unless you have sticky-out lugs; otoplasty, ear correction to you and me, plummeted by 23 per cent.

Before the surgery, Donna was positioned against the door of the little basement operating theatre. She had her picture taken at various angles, but with one fixed look: "baggly disconsolate." "Sorry, it's a bit police line-up," said the nurse. I'm thinking: *Prisoner: Cell Block H* meets *The Island of Dr Moreau*. A feeling not helped by the fact that, the day previously, my wife had taken to chirpily answering her phone, "Hello, Bride of Frankenstein here." Like I said, I'm more apprehensive than she is.

With a kiss and a hug and Nina Simone drifting out of the theatre's stereo, I left her.

As instructed, one coffee and 60 minutes later, I return to Harley Street Aesthetics. There is no sign of Donna. I sit in the cold, quiet waiting room. I flick through the clinic's promotional leaflets. There's something called the Thermage Body Procedure. There's Restylane, promising "natural beauty from within". Or you can have Fraxel, ThermoFrac and other unfortunately titled procedures. This isn't making me feel any better.

I try the magazines. There's *New!*, with Jordan raging as "Essex Army moves in on her ex". Inside, someone called "Stacey" – an EastEnder? A WAG? – is declaring "I don't want to shrink to a size 6." A copy of *Heat* has those pictures of Gordon Ramsay looking like beaten-up beetroot. "Gordon spends £50,000 on beauty treatments to look like this!" screams the headline. I gulp and check my wallet. Even *Woman & Home* is getting in on the self-improvement action: "The makeover issue you asked for" comes with added Lorraine Kelly – she's promising "the real me".

Why is Donna taking so long? Is the "real her" requiring a bit more cutting and stitching?

Eventually, after a worrying 90 minutes, she emerges. She has swabs above each eye. Four strips on each eyelid are holding them in place. She's pale but smiling. She says the pre-op injections, one by each eye, stung a little. But the procedure itself was OK.

Afterwards the nurse showed her the small sections of skin that were removed. "Long thin triangles," Donna says. "Shaped like teardrops. Like rind on bacon."

The following weeks are up and down. Donna is meant to lie back, not bend her head forward too much, take it easy. A can-do kinda girl down to her marrow, she finds this difficult. She hustles about the house, doing chores, working until – literally – her eyes bleed. Chastened and fearful that she's undone Dr Dirk's good work, she retreats tearfully to her bed.

She manages, just about, to stay housebound until the swelling and the bruising subside. She's not really embarrassed at

having had plastic surgery, but she's naturally discreet. I, too, welcome the avoidance of any awkward questions about why my wife looks as if she "walked into the door".

I do all the school runs, do errands round the neighbourhood, and try to remember which lib I've told which parent-pal. The mum up the road knows Donna had to go to the hospital for an "eye operation" (thanks, middle daughter), so I have to report fictional and



Donna chirpily answers her phone, 'Hello, Bride of Frankenstein here'

non-specific improvements to her sight. The mum round the corner, puzzled at my wife's invisibility for the best part of two weeks, has heard - from somewhere - that Donna's "not been well". "Mmm," I fudge, "but she's getting better." Then I scurry off to the chemist to buy more arnica (for the bruising) and scar gel.

Emotionally, there is turbulence. Donna frets that her new eyes aren't symmetrical. That there's a bump in one of the scars. That there's not much difference. That she's a silly, preening, frivolous woman. I wonder if all her hot, salty tears will prove a balm or an irritant to the wounds.

None of her concerns is easy for me to ally, especially when her mother comes to visit and blithely says that she doesn't really notice an improvement (cheers, Grandma).

One week, while I'm in America working, Donna goes back to Harley Street to have her stitches removed. Dr Dirk does another fine job, his unflappable bedside manner calming her down. No one's face is symmetrical. The bump is normal. It will take a good few weeks for things to "settle". And no, she is not a freak for wanting to turn back time.

"Nobody at 40 wants to look like 20," he tells her. It's about putting the clock back, say, ten years. "All we want is maintenance. That's a good word - maintenance." And it's about keeping in step with the years. "At 60, maybe you look like 50. But you're not gonna wear high heels and tiny little miniskirts and hair extensions to the butt! That's ridiculous."

And, he reports, patients often have fears. A post-operative comedown is normal, as is pre-operative paranoia. "Patients worry that they'll look different in a not-good way. Younger, yes, but oh, that's not you any more. That's a big, big fear with the facelift. And also nerve damage, that you'll be paralysed. Or that you'll have an immobile face. Or look like the mean one from *Batman*," he cackles. "The Joker face!"

In the circumstances, I think, we've got off lightly.

Six weeks after the operation, my wife and I meet Dr Dirk Kremer for brunch round the corner from his Harley Street clinic. Donna's lids have settled, as have her emotions. She's very happy with the outcome. The scales, and the fat, have fallen from her eyes. She can see, properly.

I ask the surgeon about the earlier medical recommendation, that Donna have a brow-lift. Dr Dirk agrees that this would have been too extreme.

"But if she said she wanted this totally Hollywood-diva, sophisticated look, I would say, yes, we do that," he says animatedly in his accented English. He says he has one patient who demands that he "gimme the Nicole!", meaning Kidman, meaning, in her view, "the completely frozen look. But it wears off so

quickly - she's coming back every three or four months.

"But Donna said she totally wanted to look like herself. She just wanted to get rid of the problem. Otherwise, imagine, she would look like this now," he says, grabbing her eyebrows and hoicking them up. "It looks stupid."

"That would be strange," agrees Donna, smiling as Dr Dirk manhandles her face in public. "It would be like having a different wife."

I can't help but raise my own eyebrows at this comment.

"Look, he's smiling," shrieks Donna to her new best friend. "He's keen!"

I'm not keen (seriously, I'm not). What I am is happy. Happy that my wife is happy, that she can see properly, that she feels good, that she hasn't experienced any lasting upset. And I'm relieved - that nothing went wrong, that it didn't bust the bank (although, of course, I might not be writing this exposing article if it were entirely affordable). And relieved that my wife is still my wife. She doesn't look, or feel, different. She's just Donna.

What message would Dr Dirk give to any other husbands in my position, faced - against expectation and type - with the prospect of a wife under the knife?

"They should support the wife. The wife should be happy. If the wife is happy and feels confident, yes, the rest is good. They should never prevent or prohibit this - she's not doing this to have other men looking at her. Really!" he says, patting my arm. "They have to realise that. She's doing it for herself, not other men. Why not have a beautiful, fresh-looking wife next to your side?"

Why not indeed? And on that point. Just as the redecorating of your living room makes the rest of your house look shabby, I wonder how I appear next to My New(ish) Wife. Am I an old boot next to a reboot?

Emboldened by two pints of coffee, I take the plunge. I ask Dr Dirk Kremer: what would he do to my face?

His eyes light up and his hands start fluttering round my face. He jabs my eyes and feels my jawline and pokes at my forehead. "See," he says to Donna as she squishes my nose like Play-Doh, "if you remove that upper bit of cartilage."

"Yeah!" says Donna, eyes widening with pleasure. "I see what you mean."

"How much will that cost me?" I squeak through pinched nasal cavities. "Five grand" (It's a big nose).

"Well, no, now we have a connection," replies smooth Dr Dirk, "so the price would be OK."

No more bulbous nose and mate's rates from "my" plastic surgeon? "Hmm," I think. "Interesting."

But that's a story for another day.

DONNA'S VIEW

I've had heavy eyelids since I was in my twenties. Back then, it was fine: I liked how I looked. I fancied I was a bit Charlotte Rampling. But over the past couple of years I began to feel that the lids were impeding my vision. Not being able to see the whole picture - that's the kind of thing that will make any woman feel a little fed up.

The other downer: it made me look as if I were angry all the time. I didn't want my kids growing up thinking I was Grumpy Mummy. Us modern mums are embattled enough as it is, without our faces campaigning against us.

But, for sure, there's a vanity element. I would be lying if I said there wasn't. As well as wanting to see where I'm going when I hit the shops, I don't want to look cross and miserable. And I knew that in the long term it was only going to become much worse. I can see how it looks on my mum, who's in her sixties. When I mentioned my fears, and my little germ of an idea, she was instantly supportive: she said that if she'd had her time again, and she'd had the money, she would have done it at my age.

I was quite gung-ho about the prospect of corrective surgery. It transpired that this was a bonus, both in getting my husband to sign up (and to co-sign the cheque), and in the pre-op situation. If I wasn't overly troubled, there was less reason for anyone else to be worried.

Afterwards - when I looked like a boxer on the receiving end of a first-round knockout, and had the emotional frailty to match - the impact of the procedure belatedly hit me hard. I was fearful, and I was tearful. When you see your eyes properly after the dressings are taken off, it's a shock. It's a good couple of weeks before you start to appreciate the improvements. Finally I could stop wearing my sunglasses in the shower.

Now that I'm out and about and free of my self-imposed house arrest, I've come clean with my old friends about why I was so elusive for a few weeks the other month. I also told a couple of school playground pals with whom I felt safe. The response has been very positive. Everyone is curious to know more about it. I think for a lot of women these days it is one of those "What if...?" questions.

It certainly wasn't about looking Hollywood Fabulous. It was about feeling - and seeing - better. It wasn't like sporting a radical new hairdo; I was not in search of gushing approbation of the "It takes years off you" type.

In fact, the best response is maybe no response. The other day I had lunch with a mate I hadn't seen for ages. I had to tell her exactly what it was that was different about my face. She knew something was "fresh", but she had no idea what. That's exactly what I wanted. ■