

Un-tied!

WENDY ARGENT unravels a knotty problem.

I 'LL have to be the ducks today,' he murmurs, setting out his clothes on the bed. As he picks up the blue tie, I realise that what I had previously seen as its cream splodgy pattern is in fact rows of ducks, white with yellow beaks, pairs and singles, relaxing in between rows of daffodils.

The next day it is daisies; a tiny design, which could easily be mistaken for spots. Has it been chosen with such care in order to co-ordinate with the shirt and jacket? A swift glance at the complete ensemble is all that is necessary to dismiss that theory.

Wednesday brings mottled-green toads camouflaged against a muddy-brown background, and Thursday offers cuddly-looking puffins on blue silken rocks. On Friday the suns come out, not conventional yellow ones but maroon against a swirling navy blue sky. It is only as I go to give the routine peck on the cheek as my husband leaves for work, that I notice that the suns have smiling faces.

I am intrigued. Why does someone who purports to have no interest in clothes seem to be taking so much trouble in selecting his ties? Further surveillance seems necessary, if only to eliminate the possibility of a simple rotating sequence.

During the next few weeks squirrels are observed scampering among oak leaves, red roses appear in leafy triangles, and on one occasion an apparent abstract design turns out to be carrier pigeons, complete with caps and post-bags. The regulars seem to be the toads, ducks and squirrels, the others being selected less frequently and with much deliberation.

Three weeks into my research, the penguins arrive. Unlike their peers, who can disguise themselves as a paisley pattern or a stripe, they are blatantly showing their true colours as they waddle, beaks in the air, across the scarlet background. He sees me staring and I have to say something.

'Is that a new tie?' I enquire nonchalantly. He looks down, pretending that he doesn't know which one he is wearing.

'Yes, do you like it?' he replies innocently. I tell him that I think it's very

jolly and he seems pleased, but I don't ask any more. I want to work it out for myself.

My husband works in a counselling role with individuals, many of whom are at a turning point in their lives. Often he helps them to view their situations from different perspectives. It is when I discover the spare tie in his jacket pocket that the knot of my suspicions begins to unravel into a coherent explanation. I already know that he uses a varied approach to his work, exploring life and career histories, challenging assumptions and identifying values and preferences. It takes but a small leap of imagination to visualise the ties being used as yet another tool in his eclectic approach. Carefully matched to individual clients, they are used to send subliminal messages to speed the process of adjustment. The toads are encouraging someone to take themselves more seriously, whilst the little suns help in the search for the positive aspect of a situation. The role of the carrier pigeons must be to stress the importance of communication.

I find the squirrels and oak leaves more

difficult to interpret, until I imagine a scenario in which a client needs to accept his unemployed status and become a volunteer with the National Trust. The puffins are not easy either but they do have to wobble precariously on the edge of cliffs, so perhaps there is a message in their tenacity. I see the penguin tie as a desperate attempt to persuade someone to see the lighter side of a hopeless situation.

I am not able to confirm my suspicions by obtaining any information on the clients, owing to the confidential nature of the relationships in question, but that does not stop me presenting my case. My husband is relaxing by the fire when I challenge him with my findings. I even question the ethics of his methods. So it's a surprise to hear him chuckle in response to such severe accusations. In fact he is sitting there in his green dressing-gown, with a relaxed grin on his face. Apparently I have got it all the wrong way round. The ties are chosen to put *him* in the right mood for seeing *them*. Haven't I heard of empathy? Would I manage to see someone who makes flippant remarks week after week without a few penguins to help me get into their shoes? I wonder whose shoes we are talking about, but decide not to ask because, although I hate to admit it, my theory is disintegrating.

So we have toads to enable him to see the point of view of a client unable to emerge from her protective background and squirrels to help him form a useful relationship with the workaholic. The ducks apparently help him relate to the complacent.

In spite of this reassuring explanation there is something bothering me. His expression seems to suggest both guile and amusement. The next morning not only is he still grinning but he appears to have adopted an air of self-satisfaction. The sly smile is reflected in the faces of the dozens of little Pink Panthers in green dressing-gowns adorning his tie.

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