

'There have been momentous times'

BEST FRIENDS + LUISE VALENTINER & REGI CLARE

The death of a dog brought like-minded ladies together for walks and talks

Luise runs her own freelance graphic design company, Trigger Press, and is from Denmark. She lives in Edinburgh with her dog, Fidel.

WE met on the Meadows in Edinburgh when we were out walking our dogs. There's an unofficial dog walking club there and when I heard Regi talk I detected an accent and discovered she was from Switzerland. My dad stayed there, two miles from where she came from.

So we walked home and found we were walking not only in the same direction but to the same street. Although we'd never seen each other before, it turned out we lived a few numbers apart and, after that, we kept meeting in the street and, of course, in the Meadows.

A little later Regi's dog became ill and she was very worried. Then, at a time that her husband Ron was away, the dog collapsed in the street and Regi asked me to help her get to the vet. The news was bad and she waited until Ron came back and the dog was put down. After that they both fell ill with flu – I think it was because they were grieving so.

Half a year later they decided to get a new dog and I went with Regi up to Perthshire to visit a madhouse full of dogs, where she selected one. Dogs are a common interest, as are books and words.

We're both from abroad but working and living here, and we're both fascinated by languages and linguistics, and so we always have things to talk about. Her knowledge of the English language never ceases to amaze me.

I first visited Scotland 15 years ago, and felt a strong connection; with the culture, the landscape, the people. When I moved here, the way I met people was by joining a story-telling circle which included people such as Scots language historians and folk singers. There's an identity there that I recognise, that strikes me as honest and truthful. Things happen for a reason, and I think I was meant to come here.

Regi came here for different reasons in that she met Ron, her big love, and came here to be with him. For me the boyfriend came later.

What I like about Regi, and about Ron, is that they are friendly and interested in people; they like communication. They've been here, in this street, a long time, and there is a strong community; everyone knows everyone and do things like have barbecues together. It's unusual, as Edinburgh can be a snotty place sometimes.

We have quite similar backgrounds, both quite middle-class, with parents who read a lot, and interested us in classical music and travel. But although we have similarities, we have many differences which makes for a healthy friendship.

Regi's more of a scholar than I am. I'm scatterbrained, with 10 projects on the go at once, whereas she's more focussed and has a fantastic eye for detail.

Regi doesn't seem altogether Swiss to me. She's open and inquisitive. When you move to another culture, you have to become like that but it's worthwhile. Scotland has been receptive and welcoming to us.

She's also extremely loyal. I was ill last year; I had the flu and spent a fortnight in bed with a temperature of 41°C. My boyfriend was in Africa and so she came round every day with juice and paracetamol. There was just no end to the help.

It's nice to have a pal so close, someone you can see pass your window and lean out and suggest they come in for a cup of tea.

Regi is a writer from Switzerland. She lives in Edinburgh with her husband, the writer Ron Butlin. Her first novel, *The Beauty Room*, was published last summer by Polygon.

WE met in the Meadows, where Luise had taken her young dachshund, Fidel, and I



Never streets apart: Regi Clare, left, and Luise Valentiner met by chance while walking their dogs but soon discovered strong common bonds. Picture: Michael Boyd

was out walking our golden retriever Anja. I said something like: "What a nice puppy," and she said: "What a lovely old dog!" Then I mentioned quarantine and that we were from Switzerland, and she told me she was thinking of taking Fidel on holiday to her native Denmark.

It turned out that we have a lot in common, that we know the same places, are both self-employed and love literature. We didn't realise then that we are neighbours. It was weird to find that we live only a couple of doors from each other. There have

'Neither of us quite belongs here, so we have that in common, and we love speaking English'

been a few momentous times in our friendship. Anja was not well and had become very tottery, so I made an appointment with the vet. Ron, my husband, was away then, in Portugal. The day of the appointment, I thought we could walk there, but after some steps Anja fell and just lay flat. I ran across the street to ring Luise's bell and she came out and drove us to the vet.

That's how things started. She's a resourceful, helpful woman – wonderfully nice. Anja was put down shortly after, and I was ill for a while, as was Ron. But later we got another dog, Amber, from Perthshire and Luise chummed me up there on one occasion. Luise is one of

Amber's favourite people! She goes mad when Luise comes round.

Since then, we've invited each other to our houses and met each other's families. We like chatting about books and drinking wine. We're interested in linguistics. Neither of us quite belongs here, so we have that in common, and we love speaking English. My mother tongue, Swiss German, isn't a written language. It's different from German, which I learnt at school, but have never felt comfortable with. When I came here, I just thought, why write in German when I can write in English?

I like the way that people are so open and community-minded here. It helps having a dog or a child, because you can get to know folk much more easily.

Luise is very enthusiastic about dogs too and she's someone who's very happy in herself; that really comes across. She's more easy-going than me.

She says she's scatterbrained and I'm more meticulous. I think I'm meticulous in a very Swiss way; I take things pretty seriously and if I'm asked to do something, I always try to do my best.

But Luise is like that too. Especially when it comes to language; she's very careful, and likes to do things right. I've seen her design work and she's talented and professional. I also find her loyal and appreciate all the support and encouragement she gives me with my work. Although she knows my part of Switzerland well, I've still to visit Denmark. It's the one corner of the puzzle that is still missing.

Interview: Roz Paterson