

Four weddings and a houseful



Alan and me

I'd fallen in love, but my fella didn't want any more kids. Little did he know what was to come.

By Caroline Larkin, 58

after, we married in a simple register office ceremony.

I wore a secondhand dress, my nan did the buffet and we held our reception at a local

social club. The whole thing cost £250.

'Lucky you've not spent much,' my mum said. 'I give this marriage a year.'

Not the most auspicious start, but Alan and I were deeply in love and knew we'd prove the naysayers wrong.

I didn't want to live my life without children though, so after working on Alan, he agreed we could try 'just for one' and booked a vasectomy reversal.

But the procedure didn't work and, as we drove home from the hospital, I thought, *I guess that's it.*

I worked in social care in a children's home, surrounded by little ones, so I vowed to make the best of that instead.

But seeing how devastated

I was, Alan said, 'We'll find a way.'

We began fertility treatment, during which I discovered I had PCOS.

By the time we had the fifth round, my nerves were in tatters, so Alan called the clinic for my blood test results.

'How do you feel, love?' he asked, 'because you're pregnant!'

I couldn't believe it. A gynaecologist had even told me that some women were destined to have babies, but I wasn't one of them!

Months later, our miracle daughter Tahnee arrived. But Alan and I had both grown up as only children, and knew how lonely it could be.

'You want one more, don't you?' he asked as we watched her playing alone one day.

'One more go,' I agreed.

After one round of IVF on the NHS, we had our second daughter, Kachina.

With our family complete, we rented a marquee and had Kachina christened and renewed our wedding vows at the same time. It felt like the wedding we should've had the first time.

I'd just qualified as a social

worker, and we'd bought a four-bedroom house in Preston, Lancashire, which meant we had empty rooms.

'There are so many kids in children's homes,' I told Alan one evening. 'We could really change some lives.'

As he'd just been made redundant, he could become a full-time foster carer.

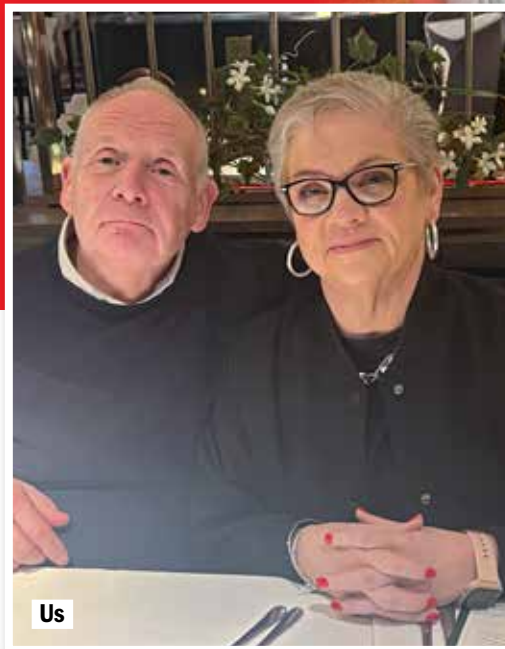
'You go to work, and I'll stay home and look after the kids,' he agreed.

From the start, I was adamant that I wanted the kids no one else would take a chance on.

Through my work, I'd seen so many siblings split up too and I knew I wanted to prevent that too, so our first placement was a sibling group of four.

One night, not long after their arrival, Alan and I sat on the sofa, surveying the chaos around us.

'We have six kids under seven,' I said. 'What have



Us



Kachina, Lucy, Alan, me, Tahnee and Chelsea

we done?'

'No, what have *you* done!' Alan replied.

But for all his bluster, my hubby was the most soft-hearted man I'd ever met and he adored his role as stay-at-home-dad-extraordinaire.

For years kids came and went, although a six-week placement often turned into 18 months because children settled so well with us.

As soon as they crossed our doorstep, they were part of the family as far as were concerned.

In the holidays we took all our foster kids to the seaside, and at Christmas I set multiple places at our table. No child was ever left behind.

Alan built two extensions on to our house to increase our capacity.

Then one day, an eight-year-old girl called Chelsea arrived who made us question everything.

She was pure dynamite, and trashed our house.

'She's trying to push us away,' I told Alan. 'What this

girl really needs is a family.'

We applied for a special guardianship order, which would become an open adoption – meaning she could still see her birth family.

'How would you like to change your surname to Larkin?' I asked Chelsea.

From that moment on, Alan and I were 'mam and dad', and as Chelsea settled, she thrived. She'd just needed a place to belong.

Soon after, our 65th foster child became our second adoptive daughter.

Little Lucy came to us at six months old. She'd been born at 26 weeks with a cleft lip, and doctors had warned she'd never walk or talk.

She was an odd little thing, bald as a coot, but when I first met her she gave me the widest smile and I just fell in love.

'She's our daughter – she's staying with us,' I told Alan.

After we'd adopted a third little girl, Alan and I finally felt we'd reached

full capacity.

By then we had five kids at home and 68 foster placements under our belts.

We'd come into it to change kids' lives and that's what we'd done, so we retired from

the fostering service and soon after, with our five kids beside us, we renewed our vows for the second time.

'Job's a good 'un,' I told Alan.

I focused my energy on setting up my own fostering agency. But that brought me into contact with a little boy who was just impossible to place.

He was only four but had really bad eczema. His skin was broken and bloody. Nobody wanted him.

When I met him for the first time my heart just broke. The stress was radiating off him.

It was Christmas, and I went home and told Alan all about him.

'He needs someone to give him a chance,' I said.

We lodged our application

to become foster carers once again, and three days later he moved in.

Two years on, I'm hoping he's going to be with us forever. He's the son I didn't give birth to.

With our girls growing up and moving out, we began fostering again. Our first placement was two siblings.

Despite me heading for 60 and Alan already there, our lives were once more filled with a merry-go-round of swimming lessons, horse riding, gymnastics and martial arts, in a house filled with fun and laughter.

'What about another vow renewal?' I asked Alan as we approached our 35th wedding anniversary. 'We might not make it to 50!'

So, we said our vows for the fourth time, surrounded by our kids, grandkids, and many of the children we've fostered over the years.

We had a flower ladder with a photo of each of our five girls on the rungs, then the number 74 at the top to make sure each of the kids we'd fostered over the years was thought of on the day.

Every single child who's crossed my threshold has taught me something, and we've done our best to give them a happy, loving home for as long as they're with us.

Our little Lucy is now 13, and despite the doctors' warning that she'd never walk or talk, she's thriving in mainstream education.

Chelsea, 28, now has a son of her own, making Alan and I proud grandparents to her little one and Tahnee's two children.

Our house runs on happiness and it's hard to imagine it ever being empty.

There's no upper age limit for fostering, so we'll keep going for as long as we're able to.

'Maybe when we get to 100 kids we'll stop,' I told Alan recently.

He just looked at me and rolled his eyes!

I thrive on being surrounded by kids and chaos, and I wouldn't have it any other way!