

[Exclusive]

Maggie Tabberer, with daughter Amanda, welcomed us into her Sydney home (which is just as stylish as you'd expect).

80 years young Inside the private world of Maggie Tabberer

She was the stunning, leggy brunette who became photographer Helmut Newton's muse (then his lover) and captivated Australia as a TV star and fashion trailblazer. In an exclusive interview, Maggie Tabberer talks to **Juliet Rieden** about the men in her life, her cherished daughters, the impossible sadness of losing her son and celebrations for her 80th.

PHOTOGRAPHY ● ALANA LANDSBERRY STYLING ● MATTIE CRONAN

Sun is streaming through the white plantation louvres and dancing across the chiselled cheekbones and oceanic eyes of one of our most famous and beautiful faces. The camera shutter chatters excitedly; a wry smile, a head tilt, a searching gaze and there it is, frame after frame, a perfect take. The icon in front of the lens is Maggie Tabberer and, yes, even in her 80th year, as *The Weekly's* photo shoot attests, she's still got it.

Earlier, in front of the bathroom mirror, Maggie executed the perfect head wrap – a magical manoeuvre culminating in what has become her trademark jauntily angled turban; from right-side forehead to left eyebrow. "I've got no hair to speak of these days, darling, so I have drawers full of these things," she says, with a throaty laugh.

The style icon and former model is still as passionate about fashion as she is about looking her best, which currently is ameliorated by a fridge full of Lite n' Easy »

HAIR BY BRAD MULLINS. MAKE-UP BY ALLISON BOYLE. MAGGIE WEARS NICOLA WAITE TUNIC AND PANTS. AND TONY WHITE PEARL NECKLACE AND EARRINGS. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHED.

meals. "I really am doing it," she says, laughing. "I feel fat and I am round here," Maggie tells me, running her hands around her middle. "It does still matter. Of course, it does. I want to reduce some. I don't feel good."

Maggie may have retired, but she's still recognised everywhere, says daughter Amanda. "It's embedded in her DNA to strive to look good. She's got a good, healthy ego. She's got a will to make herself better, which a lot of people at 80 couldn't care less about."

Maggie has always fought what she calls "the battle of the bulge". It was the reason she quit mainstream modelling. Yet without it, she wouldn't have diversified into TV, become Fashion Editor of *The Australian Women's Weekly* – a position she held for 15 years, working under seven different editors – and created her own label, Maggie T, cornering the market for women sized 12 to 24.

"I think we can be very proud of the way that she helped women in Australia," her eldest daughter, Brooke, tells me over a cup of tea in her local cafe, just round the corner from her mum's home. "She was pretty out there, particularly. And they saw the first signs of that on *Beauty And The Beast*, when she said, 'Women, be proud of yourselves, don't put yourself down because you're a big girl.' She used to sign off her TV show, 'And remember, girls, whatever you do, be good at it.' And she really meant that. It was her mantra."

Slipping effortlessly into her former roles as model and stylist, Maggie is in her element and watching her work, it's easy to see how her eager passion, sense of fun and innate style caught the eye of the most famous and controversial fashion photographer working in Australia in the 1950s.



The demanding and notoriously difficult Berlin-born Helmut Newton was married to Aussie beauty June Brunell and working out of a series of rooms in Flinders Lane in Melbourne's fashion district when he and Maggie first met. Helmut was different from other fashion photographers of the day. He relished working with bigger, taller models with attitude and his pictures oozed a gritty, urban elegance.

In Maggie, Helmut met his muse and together the pair created their own magic, turning Maggie's until then suburban Adelaide world upside down and changing her life forever, both professionally and personally.

Before Helmut, Maggie's modelling was sedate and parochial, and her experience of life, love and men decidedly limited. She was a very young mum of two and modelling was all about stretching her wings and reclaiming her independence from a controlling husband.

"I loved modelling, but I also enjoyed making my own money for

really the first time in my life," says Maggie.

She had married Charles Tabberer in 1953 when she was a gorgeously coltish 17 and he was 35. Charles wasn't her first serious boyfriend – that was another 35-year-old and the relationship ended unceremoniously when Maggie fell pregnant at just 15. "That's not a good memory," says Maggie, who confesses that as the youngest of five, she was a very rebellious teenager.

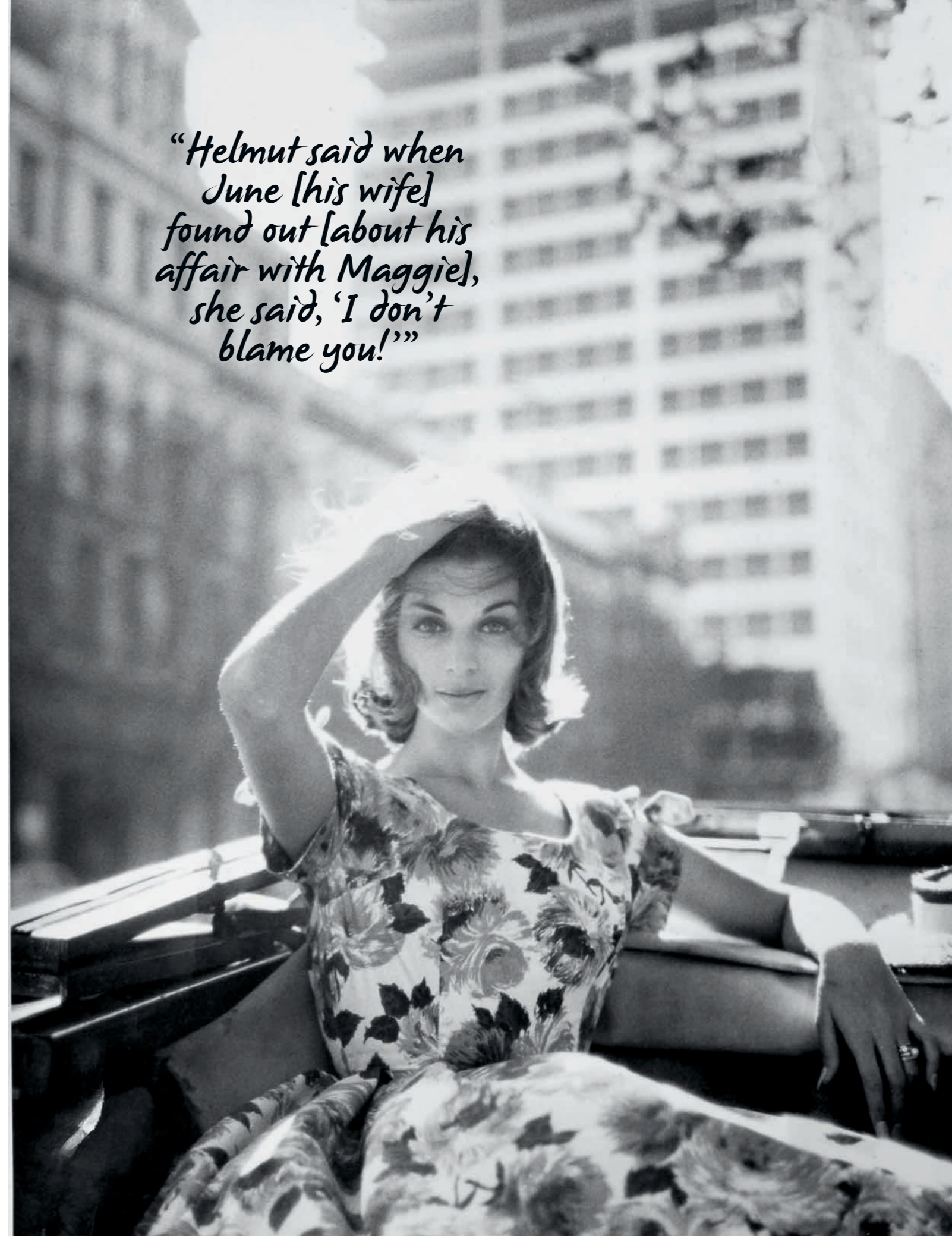
"He should have known better. Sam was short and Italian, and a builder and he had a huge flash car, and he used to rock up in that," she recalls. Maggie had an abortion unbeknownst to her parents, leaning on her sister, Nancy, for support.

"I staggered out of the doctor's rooms and just was absolutely devastated," she says. Nancy agreed Maggie was too young to marry and an illegitimate child was out of the question, so Sam arranged an abortion. Maggie visited a local woman – "a very normal-looking, neat lady in a black dress" she recalls in her biography – and tells me that she can still remember every horrible moment of the procedure.

Later that night, back at her childhood home in Parkside, Adelaide, Maggie collapsed and her secret was uncovered. "Mummy had to know. Daddy had to know. There was no keeping anything," she says with a shudder. "My mother was wonderful. She was consoling, but afterwards, every sentence finished with, 'And now I hope you've learned your lesson!'"

When Maggie met car dealer Charles Tabberer, Molly and Alfred Triggar must have worried that history might repeat itself. Yet the 18-year age difference between the couple didn't »

"Helmut said when June [his wife] found out [about his affair with Maggie], she said, 'I don't blame you!'"



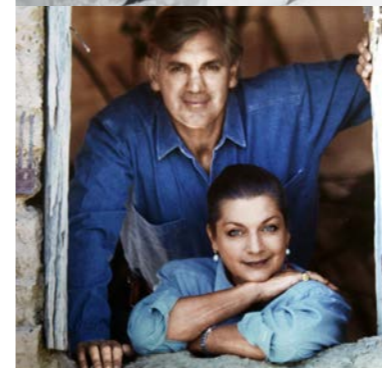
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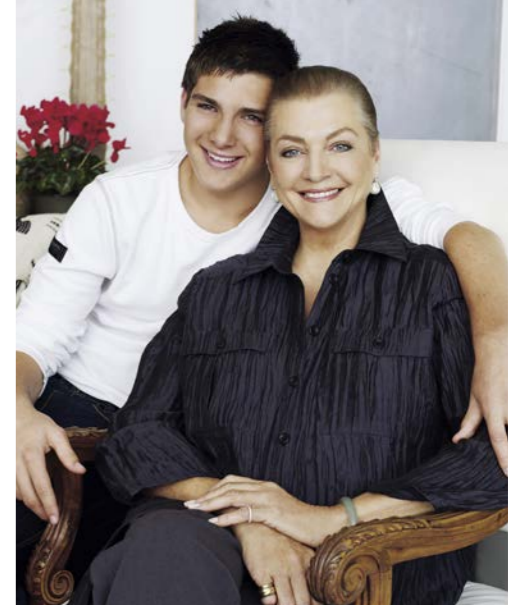
LEFT: At 17, Maggie married Charles Tabberer, 18 years her senior. **RIGHT:** With grandson Marco in 2009.



ABOVE: Maggie found love with Richard Zachariah and they presented a successful lifestyle TV show together, but their relationship split her family.



TOP: Maggie adored Helmut Newton. **ABOVE:** Ettore Prossimo was the love of her life. **RIGHT:** Maggie and her girls, captured by Helmut Newton.



bother Maggie. “I thought he was handsome. He spoke beautifully and was a whizz bang on the tennis court and golf course,” she explains. Charles took Maggie out and showed her off, and after just six months he proposed.

Looking back, Maggie thinks she might have had “some sort of father complex” in her choice of men. Certainly, she found boys of her own age to be “complete ratbags”, she chuckles. “They always wanted to get into your pants and get you to sit in the back seat of the car, and all that business, which I hated.” Charles, on the other hand, was “dashing and successful, and I felt secure with him – it didn’t stay that way, though.”

Maggie’s own father, Arthur, “liked a drink or two or five or 10,” she says. “It didn’t please Mummy, of course, and the worst thing was that it absolutely destroyed his health. He smoked hand-rolled cigarettes, no filter, and eventually he got cancer in the throat and went through some awful treatment.”

She says her parents were relieved when she told them that Charles wanted to marry her. “I think they

thought, ‘Thank God, she’s off our hands. Someone else can worry about her.’ ”

Aged 18, Maggie was pregnant with her first daughter, Brooke, and 14 months after that, Amanda was born. She adored her girls, but suddenly at the age of 21 Maggie was married with two babies. “The pregnancies were planned,” Maggie tells me. “Charles insisted on that. I’ve always thought, in my heart of hearts, if I’m very honest, he thought, ‘I’m not going to let her slip away from me, so I’ll keep her barefoot and pregnant at home’ ... I was certainly that and, yes, it tied me down.

“I was so young, I got restless and, finally, after several people had said to me, ‘You should be in modelling’, I started to listen. One of my first jobs was at Birks Chemist in Rundle Street and I used to walk past a window with photographs of models – there was

a modelling school upstairs. Young women would troop up the stairs for lessons in deportment and make-up.”

Maggie joined the classes and proved to be a natural, quickly snapped up for fashion parades and advertising work for David Jones in Adelaide. Soon, she was working in Melbourne too. At an appointment with the famous Helmut Newton, her life changed forever.

With Helmut, everything was different. Maggie was creating art and it ignited a creativity she never knew she had. “I was like a big sponge at that time. I watched him and I knew what he liked, I knew how he wanted me to stand. I don’t know if it was telepathy or some intuitive thing, but I would start to throw in my idea of what I should be doing and we »

developed a sort of communication. Also, I was game,” Maggie recalls.

“He had a thing about photographing you in all those little alleyways in Melbourne that I now realise looked very European to him. He’d find a bucket of water or a hose and hose down the cobblestones so they glistened and looked very European in the shots. We did a lot of night photography, where I was freezing my butt off. He went and got a little phial of brandy from the local pub and brought it back. And I went home very happy.”

Most of all, Maggie and Helmut shared a sense of humour. “We’d be standing on the hill and the flies were in your eyes, the wind howling, taking the dress in the wrong direction, and I’d say, ‘Nice day for it, isn’t it?’ We’d both fall about laughing.”

Inevitably, they fell in love. “I had started to adore him,” says Maggie.

Meanwhile, Charles Tabberer was now out of work thanks to a downturn in the economy and Maggie was the main breadwinner. Rather than commute, Maggie moved the family to Melbourne, but Charles, unable to find work, left his wife and two daughters and returned to Adelaide.

“He got in the car and drove away, with nary a backward glance, and never worried about them,” says Maggie. “He used to get on the phone in the first month or so after we separated and say, ‘You’ve got to bring my children back to me’. And I would reply, ‘What have you got for us in Adelaide? You’ve got no job.’”

Brooke and Amanda have no memories of their father being around and didn’t get to know him until they were grown up. “We got an annual birthday card with a dollar in it, that

was all,” says Amanda. “I thought Maggie could do everything. She could be famous, she could have a career, she could have two daughters, she could run the show. She didn’t need him.”

Meanwhile, Maggie and Helmut became stars of the fashion world. Their affair “seemed very natural”, says Maggie, looking back. “We spent so much time together in all sorts of situations.”

Maggie says that June – Helmut’s wife – knew. Did she care? “Well, Helmut said to me that when she found out, she said to him something along the lines of ‘I don’t blame you!’”

Maggie’s daughters knew Helmut, but not as Mum’s lover. “I remember feeling he was very foreign,” says Brooke. “But there were so many



people in Maggie’s life back then, he was just another, who happened to be a bit more famous.”

It was decades later, when Maggie was writing her memoir, that Amanda uncovered the truth. “She was showing me this black and white contact sheet of photos – beautiful head shots of Maggie nude with her hair down. It looked like she was tousled and just thrown out of a bed by a guy. And then Maggie confessed that’s exactly what had happened. I was shocked, I thought, ‘Wow, that’s

pretty full-on. You jumped out of bed and he took photographs of you like that, wrapped up in sheets?’ She said, ‘Yes, that’s basically what happened.’”

The romance came to an end when Helmut moved to Paris to work for French *Vogue*. “He said to me, ‘You should come’,” recalls Maggie. “But I couldn’t believe that I could learn to speak French and I had two little girls who were totally dependent on me because their father was never involved in their upbringing, either financially or emotionally or anything else. I knew that it wouldn’t work.”

Does she wish their love had flourished? “No, it was perfect. It was a lovely thing. I learned a huge amount from him and he helped me develop a knowledge of what photography was all about,” says Maggie.

When Helmut left, Maggie began the next chapter of her career. “I’d started to have the battle of the bulge,” says Maggie, who could no longer fit into the model sample sizes. “I think it was having two children, probably drinking too much white wine and not being able to go on a diet because I was a very oral comfort person – probably still am.”

“It was stressful being sole provider for my daughters and I had to have another string to my bow.”

Maggie moved to Sydney and started work in PR and, later, fashion journalism and TV. She also met the love of her life, restaurateur Ettore Prossimo. “Ettore means ‘next’,” Maggie tells me, with an ironic smile. “I absolutely adored him. He was grey-haired, elegant, a big daddy. He adored my kids and they him.”

“He was a great dad,” Brooke concurs. Maggie and Ettore eventually married in 1967, with Amanda and Brooke as bridesmaids. »

THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG BARRETT. OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALANA LANDSBERRY. MAGGIE WEARS AKIRA CAFTAN AND TONY WHITE EARRINGS.



Always elegant, Maggie on her doorstep. Opposite: Strong and beautiful, the Tabberer women - Brooke, Maggie and Amanda - together.

“Pross was like our real dad, the Italian stepfather. He was always there, even if they were fighting and we had moved out, as often happened – he would still come by and pick us up in the big old Valiant, drive us up the hill to school, drop us back in the afternoon. He was dedicated.”

Growing up with a famous TV mother was fun. “We ate fish fingers and potato gems because she was always in a hurry to get to the TV station,” says Amanda, laughing. “We didn’t mind; we went along. On *Beauty And The Beast*, we were underneath [the Beauties’ desk] or in the make-up room.”

When Maggie fell pregnant, Ettore was thrilled and the girls couldn’t wait for a new sibling. After a difficult caesarean, Maggie welcomed “beautiful Francesco – or Francescino as we called him” into the world and a picture of mother and son made the front page of *The Daily Mirror*.

Yet, just 10 days later, tragedy struck. “I was in bed in hospital and my doctor came in the door,” recalls Maggie. “He looked ashen. I’ve never seen a human being look so dreadfully sick. Tears welled in his eyes. He said, ‘Oh, darling, I’ve got the hardest thing in the world to tell you.’ I said, ‘Oh no, it’s Francesco, isn’t it.’ He said, ‘Yes, he’s gone.’ I said, ‘Someone’s got to [abducted] him.’ Because I’d got a couple of really nasty letters, I’m sure from women who lost children or were poor and thought I had it all, but vile.”

Baby Francesco died from cot death, now called Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Maggie fell apart and Ettore “was completely crushed”.

Brooke and Amanda never met their brother. “In those days, they wouldn’t let kids into the hospital, so the only time we saw our brother was on the cover of the newspaper,” says Brooke.

The loss struck at the very heart of Maggie and Ettore’s relationship as



Daughters Amanda (above) and Brooke say there will be a festival of events to celebrate Maggie’s 80th.

both battled inconsolable grief. “I wanted to crawl into my shell. I didn’t want to have to cope with anybody else’s grief. It was too much. The mere loss of him was enough to try and recover from,” says Maggie, who admits she has never come to terms with Francescino’s death and never will. “Nothing cuts as deep as losing a child. I don’t believe so.”

For Brooke and Amanda, who were 12 and 10 at the time, it was the first time they’d seen their mother unable to cope. “I don’t remember a lot in that first year,” says Amanda. “I just remember Maggie constantly in tears.”

Sadly, Ettore and Maggie’s marriage buckled under the strain and eventually both sought comfort elsewhere.

Maggie’s new relationship with journalist Richard Zachariah divided the family further. For the first time, Maggie was with a younger man and she thought she was in love.

“He was the most handsome, mad Aussie larrikin,” she recalls.

Yet her passion wasn’t shared by Amanda. “I hated him,” she says, laughing. “He was so cocky.” Brooke was more circumspect and felt relieved her mother had found love again. Yet when they married, the cracks started

to show. “He was jealous of Brooke and me. We had to battle for her attention just to have a cup of tea with her. It was a nightmare.”

Amanda, meanwhile, had moved to Italy and met her own love, handsome Italian Sergio. Their son, Marco, was born in Australia, with Maggie by Amanda’s side. The son Maggie had lost came back to her in the form of grandson Marco, now 25. “He’s a very special boy,” says Brooke. “He adores Maggie.”

In a few weeks, Maggie and Amanda are heading off to see Marco, who is back in Italy. “He’s funny, handsome, dashing and kind,” says Maggie.

Today, Maggie is happily single and tells me that after three marriages and wonderful lovers, her dance card is officially full. “At 80, I’ve come to my senses about men ... I’m not going to be getting into bed and taking my clothes off – don’t be ridiculous! I’ve still got a healthy ego.”

When I relay this news to Brooke and Amanda, they swap knowing looks. “Oh, God, never say never. If somebody turned her feather tails, I bet she’d be interested,” says Brooke.

For her 80th birthday in December, Brooke and Amanda reckon there will be a series of dinner parties and Maggie’s godson, Mathew, the son of her life-long best friend Barbara Turnbull, is staging a fancy shindig in the Southern Highlands in January.

If Maggie could have anyone to her 80th party, who would it be? “George Clooney, David Niven, Winston Churchill – because he’s powerful and witty. I’d like KP [Kerry Packer] to come back, also my dear friend Barb. I’d love to have seen Francescino as a man and I’d have my grandson, Marco, there too and, of course, my girls.” **AWW**

“At 80, I’ve come to my senses about men.”



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