

The climb

A full-page photograph of a mountain landscape. The foreground is filled with dark, jagged, and mossy rocks. In the background, a steep mountain slope rises, covered in patches of snow and ice. The sky is a deep blue with scattered white clouds. The title 'The climb' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif font, with 'The' on the top line and 'climb' on the bottom line.



Melissa Arnot has summited Mount Everest five times; as you read this she's going for a record-setting sixth—this time without an oxygen tank. Watch her dispatches from the fiercest mountain on earth at glamour.com, but first, let her tell you the very personal reasons she's going.

Text by **Liz Brody** Photographs by **Jonathan Mancuso**

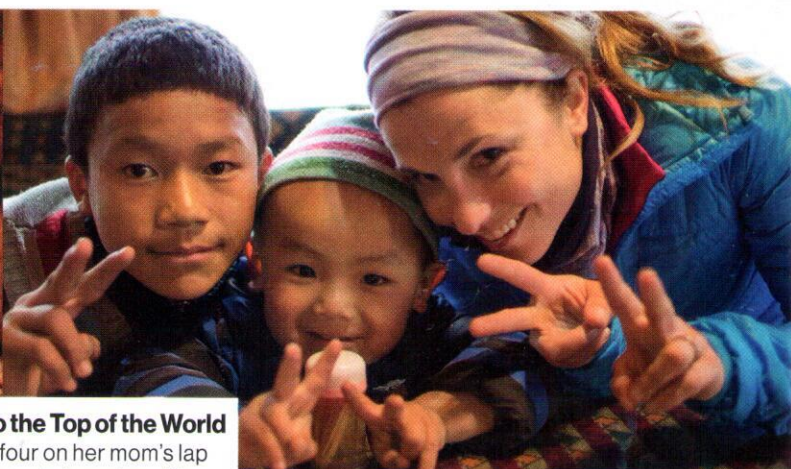
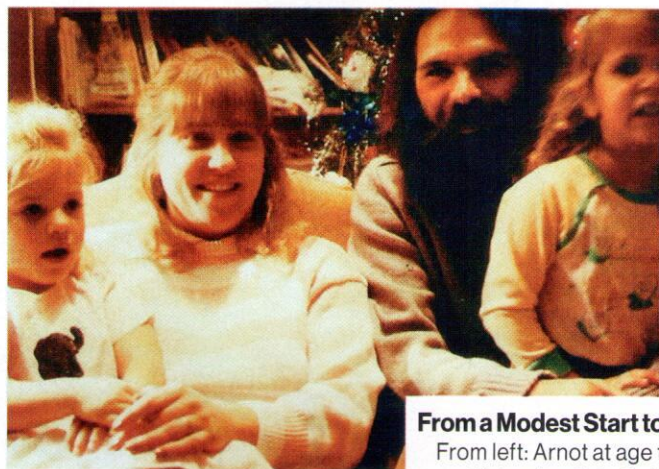
Early on a cold spring morning last year, Melissa Arnot, 31, woke up at Everest Base Camp to the sound of radios and panicked chatter. It was the kind of moment a climber dreads: There'd been an avalanche. Within two hours Arnot, an accomplished mountaineer and guide who has summited the world's highest peak five times, was in a helicopter en route to the scene, where she saw that a massive chunk of glacier—weighing up to 30 million pounds, experts later estimated—had come crashing down. Twenty-five people had been in its path. “I just started evacuating whoever I could and recovering bodies,” she says. “I had to compartmentalize everything—it was the only way I could really deal with it.” Sixteen climbers were killed—five of them Arnot's friends. The accident brought the entire season on Everest to an end; it was the deadliest day in the mountain's recorded history.

After that Arnot could have been forgiven for heading home to Sun Valley, Idaho, and hanging up her crampons. Instead, as you read this, she's back on the mountain going for her *sixth* summit, this time without “O's”—that's the climber term for supplemental oxygen. Less than three percent of summiters have ever accomplished the feat; if she's successful she will tie the record (with Nepalese climber Lakpa Sherpa) for most Everest summits by a

hiking and camping to teach us that experiences are more important than things,” says Stephanie, 32, now a district manager for Safeway in Anchorage, Alaska. But when the girls were 12 and 13, the family moved to Whitefish, Montana, a resort town, and in that wealthy setting, their own modest means suddenly felt starkly real. “I had no idea who Tommy Hilfiger was or Doc Marten. We'd never had a TV,” says Arnot. “As a seventh grader moving into that—I mean, it was a nightmare. I remember sewing Nike logos onto my Payless shoes because I suddenly understood that labels mattered.”

Arnot, quite simply, couldn't wait to leave Whitefish. She graduated high school early and went to the University of Iowa but, with two full-time jobs, was too busy to study and left before finishing. Then she stumbled on her life's purpose. “I came back to Montana when I was 19 and hiked up my first peak, Great Northern,” she says. “I loved that nature doesn't care what your job is, how much you make, what your gender is—the freedom of all that. Every time I climbed, I felt a bit more complete. Being on the mountain was a peaceful place for me, so I kept chasing that feeling.”

She decided to become a mountain guide. It's not the easiest career choice: Arnot had to learn rock and ice climbing; she also got certified in emergency wilderness medicine and as a paramedic. Her first job paid only \$12,000 a year, and she lived out of a blue '91



From a Modest Start to the Top of the World

From left: Arnot at age four on her mom's lap with her family in Colorado; hanging with Sherpa friends; climbing with Jones in Nepal; and resting in the foothills of the Himalayas. Previous page: Trekking Kala Patthar with the black peak of Mount Everest in view.

woman and become the first American female to reach the top without oxygen. “The idea that you can survive in the highest place on earth without drugs—because supplemental oxygen could be considered a drug—is amazing,” Arnot says. “It's the ultimate test.”

What propels a woman to become an adventurer? To risk her life to push her own limits? “If I were playing amateur psychologist,” Arnot says, “I'd have to say a huge part of my drive for climbing comes from my childhood.” Her parents were “the quintessential hippies”; the family lived in a trailer near Durango, Colorado, where Arnot and her older sister, Stephanie, went to school on the Southern Ute Indian Reservation. “Stephanie was a perfectionist, unlike me,” says Arnot. “One teacher called her LMP for Little Miss Perfect, and me LAMP—Little *Almost* Miss Perfect!” But when she was in kindergarten, their father, a builder, broke his back, and the family hit a rough patch. “We'd already been struggling to get by; after that we were getting boxes of food from local charities,” she recalls. “I particularly remember the Kraft macaroni and cheese, because I'd never seen it before. Now, ironically, it's a great high-altitude food when I'm climbing.”

Though her parents couldn't afford luxuries, they did what they could to impress on the girls the value of happiness. “They took us

Toyota pickup with 240,000 miles on it, sleeping in the back on a plywood platform she'd built, complete with a drawer underneath to store her climbing gear.

She had found her calling—but it was a dangerous one. In 2007 she and another guide were leading three clients on Mount Rainier in Washington. One client was tired, so the other guide suggested Arnot take some of the group back to base. “The route was icy, and I didn't want to split up, but in the end that's what we did,” she says. “There were four of us on a rope, and somebody fell—and we all started sliding. I suddenly thought: There's no way we can stop. We're going to die.” They careened down 200 feet until her leg improbably jammed in an ice crack and brought them to a halt. “Nobody was seriously injured, but my life was flashing before my eyes,” she says. It was an unforgettable lesson. “I was upset that I'd broken the commitment to myself to be safe. From then on, I've always listened to my gut.” Some years later Mary Anne Potts, editorial director of *National Geographic Adventure*, had Arnot as a guide on the same peak. “The mountains are not forgiving,” says Potts, “and having a trustworthy guide makes all the difference. Melissa is amazing—strong, demanding, compassionate. I learned so much from her about mountaineering—and myself.” Says Arnot, “I love guiding because you get to watch people find something out about themselves that they didn't know, and magic happens.”

Despite those moments of intense connection, her career can be isolating. "It's very lonely sometimes," Arnot admits. Training for Everest is a full-time job; a typical day might include a two-hour hike up a ski hill wearing a 50-pound pack, then an intense sprint and weight workout at the gym—all on an empty stomach, to prepare for low-fuel moments on the mountain—followed by a one-hour run or yoga. Arnot also does marathons as mental training. "I hate running—I do it to prove to myself that even if I don't want to do it, I can," she says. "There are a lot of days when you stick your head outside the tent and it's not pleasant, especially at 2:00 A.M., and you have to start climbing."

Now married, Arnot says the work has been a strain on her romantic life. "When you're pushing your body in life-and-death situations, you form a level of intimacy with your fellow climbers that's hard to share with your boyfriend or spouse," she says. She once saw a therapist about how to navigate a partner's jealousies. "She told me that to save my relationship, I should immediately quit climbing," Arnot says. "I wanted to scream and cry and fight all at the same time. If I were a man, what are the chances she'd tell me

the world. At one point, as the climbers gathered at their tent midmountain, a large group of Sherpas, some with stones, surrounded them, shouting threats. Arnot stepped in front of the Europeans and argued for peace. "She was physically a shield," says one of the climbers, Simone Moro, a renowned Italian alpinist and a helicopter pilot. "She was the only person who did anything. She saved our lives."

Arnot brushes off the incident. But she's haunted by another life she couldn't save three years earlier. "I was climbing a peak, Baruntse, near

Everest, with Chhewang Nima—a Sherpa I'd worked with before, a really warm, loving guy—who was up ahead," she says. "And then the ice collapsed, the ice he was standing on. He was just swept away. It was devastating. At the time I went into emergency rescue mode, trying to find his body, but I couldn't, and I came down alone. To have to go to his wife and tell her he wasn't coming back—that was the hardest day of my life."

And when Arnot realized that the sudden loss of Nima's income would plunge his wife and two sons into deep poverty, "I promised myself that I would pay her what his salary would have been

SUCCESS IS...

"Testing my limits:"

—Melissa Arnot



to quit my job? Zero. I have built my career doing something that makes me feel so alive and so happy. To quit climbing? That's just not going to happen."

And she is one of the few women at her level. "Fifteen to 20 percent of climbers are women, but there are virtually no female guides on the big mountains," says Vanessa O'Brien, an Explorers Club member who holds the women's record for climbing the world's seven highest summits in the shortest amount of time. "A lot of male climbers don't want to hire a female guide because they think, Oh God, it involves a backpack; she can't do it. But high altitude requires mental strength more than physical strength. Melissa has plenty of both."

An unexpected source of that strength, Arnot says, has been her tight bonds with many Sherpas (the Himalayans who prepare the trails and carry gear for visiting climbers). Arnot has learned their language; she had a Sherpa wedding. It's unusual for a Western climber to be so welcome—the steep inequality between Sherpa guides, who risk their lives for little pay, and the climbers, who provide a needed boost to the local economy, has become a heated issue in the mountaineering world. In 2013 a misunderstanding between a group of Sherpas and three Europeans climbing up the trail escalated into a brawl that made news around

as long as I was working," Arnot says. The experience inspired her to start the Juniper Fund in 2012, which supports loved ones of workers killed on the mountain, including each of the 16 families affected by last year's avalanche.

And now, as Arnot heads toward what's known as the Death Zone—the highest 3,000 feet of Everest, where humans can survive only 24 hours without extra oxygen—she's all too aware that everything has to align: the weather, her equipment, her health. "In moments of self-doubt when I might think, This hurts, I should stop," she says, "I know to dig deep and tell myself, You got this!" Her climbing partner, Ben Jones, will be with her (they'll each carry their own gear), along with photographer Jonathan Mancuso and a Sherpa to shoulder the camera equipment. Arnot knows there's a chance she won't see her family again, or her dog, Avalanche. But she's as prepared as she can be: She's got her trusty baby wipes, Chap Stick, and Sour Patch Kids in her pack. "I feel strong and excited—like a caterpillar that, after all this hard work to become something, is about to emerge as a butterfly, ready to fly," she says. "I'm even hoping to get down from the mountain early, to sneak a few days at the beach in Thailand afterward."

Ever the optimist, she's also packed her swimsuit.

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Liz Brody is Glamour's news director. Follow Arnot's climb at video.glamour.com.