

The Diet Martyr

In Life, Dr, Robert Atkins was a renegade, doing battle with the medical Establishment over his famous low-carb diet. In death, he's the focus of a holy war, pitting ascetic versus libertine and disciple versus disciple. The schisms in the Church of Atkins.

BY STEVE FISHMAN

VERONICA ATKINS IS SELLING THE APARTMENT ON Sutton Place South, though everything is still there: the reasonably priced art her husband loved to buy, and his pills, rows of nutritional supplements-he gobbled 50 a day. She lives in Palm Beach now in grief, and sometimes in steely anger. The grief is over her late husband, the famous diet doctor Robert C. Atkins, and so is the anger. The money has come since his death-hundreds of millions of dollars from the sale of Atkins Nutritionals-along with vindication. Atkins's low-carb approach to eating has reshaped food markets. T.G.I. Friday's now promotes low-carb items-like chicken wings-with an Atkins seal of approval. Subway has an Atkins line. There is even a low-carb beer, Michelob Ultra. Most of it has come too late. Atkins has been gone almost a year, dead at 72 after a fall on a sidewalk. "It's tragic," Veronica says one morning over coffee, "that Bobby's not here for this."

They met late in life-he was 57 when they married. Everywhere he went-speeches, conferences, even to his nightly radio show-she was there. "I am depressed now," she says. But then, worse, is that his detractors won't let him be. "They vilify him," she says in her slight Russian accent. To her, it sometimes seems as if his death has only intensified the attack.

Her Bobby had long been embattled, almost from the moment

he published *Dr Atkins' Diet Revolution* in 1972. They still line up to take shots at him. 'Nasty people,' she fumes. They say Bobby was fat-even the mayor made that crack. They intimate that he died from heart disease. They say his diet is harmful. "Why won't they let him alone," she wonders, "and let me grieve in peace?"

IN DEATH, ATKINS HAS SEEMED A DIET MARTYR, more successful and more controversial than ever. Detractors dispute his message, argue over his death, its cause, its meaning. You might lose weight on Atkins, they concede, but you'd harm your health, just, they allege, as he did. For doctors who'd long opposed him, the success of meat-mad Atkins was a grim sign. "It's the world gone insane," says Dr. John McDougall, who once had a best-selling diet book of his own-vegetarian, of course.

But it isn't only his detractors who won't let him be. Atkins's own disciples' skirmish, each trying to claim his mantle. At least four former Atkins employees have opened practices, competing to fulfill, as one said, 'Atkins's dream.' These loyalists continue to parse the master's words, reinterpret his meaning. "I'm moving to where Atkins would have gone," says Dr. Fred Pescatore, a former Atkins employee who will, in May, publish *The Hamptons Diet*. ("They all think they know better," says Veronica.)

Atkins himself might have savored the attention his corpse is getting. He was, in life, palpably hungry for it—and it came almost too late for him to enjoy. Almost.

SHOULD I INVITE DR. ATKINS?" Samantha asked her dozen guests. It was July 2002, a Saturday, shortly before lunch at Pauline Pitt's summer place in Southampton, the rental with the great garden Pauline had already directed that the buffet be set up by the pool when her daughter, Samantha Boardman, had the cheerful inspiration. Why not invite Dr. Atkins? Wouldn't that be perfect!

"Everyone shrieked with delight," recalls Samantha.

"Oh, of course, he's the best thing," said Pitt, heir to banking fortunes. "Everybody wants him around"

This was the glorious summer that a piece by Gary Taubes in *The New York Times Magazine* asserted that low-fat diets had failed, and provided scientific evidence, of the kind Atkins himself never did, for why. The article didn't claim that Atkins was right, but said he might be, and that was enough. The American Medical Association and the American Heart Association had got it wrong. Instead, the article said, this cocky diet doc—who'd always seemed a sideshow to real obesity research—might just be on the money.

Soon, Atkins would be invited in from the official cold he'd been relegated to for most of his career. The American Heart Association, no less, invited him to speak. Barbara Walters named him one of the ten most *fascinating* people of the year. His book would sell a breathtaking million more copies. Atkins had to think that he might get another shot at *Oprah*, his ardent desire. (Atkins, who'd managed just one appearance, constantly bugged friends, "Don't you know anybody at *Oprah*?")

Atkins, of course, still had one serious worry—a nagging heart condition. Three months earlier, he'd been at breakfast when his heart stopped—one of his employees revived him, giving him mouth-to-mouth. Still, heart be damned, at the hospital Atkins ordered bacon and eggs



HE WAS PUGNACIOUS,
open minded, "a showman,"
says his wife – he did a stint
as a Catskills comic waiter.

DON'T STOP THE CARNIVORE: Atkins in his New York office in 1967.



and declared he had diseases to cure. "I think I can wipe out diabetes," he said.

And why not? Optimism was his strong suit. "He always felt infallible," says one friend. Plus, suddenly, this aging, beleaguered doctor with the second chin (which he sometimes hid behind a cupped hand) seemed fascinating, just as Barbara Walters had said. That summer, everyone wanted him at dinner. Even high society.

Atkins owned a sweeping double-towered brick house on the wrong side of Southampton, and had never been part of the fancier Hamptons set. "Under the radar," said one social monitor. In fact, when one Hamptons socialite was considering a job with the diet doctor, a friend responded, "Oh, I thought he was dead." The obese might drive in from Ohio, consign their hipless waists to his care. In fancier circles, Atkins seemed a relic. Said one socialite who got a glimpse of his house, "So late-seventies."

And yet that season, Samantha seemed just one of the attractive young socialites happy to be seen with the great Dr. Atkins. She'd get him to dinner at

Swiftly's with Dr. Pat Wexler, a Botox pioneer, and Lou Gerstner Jr., former head of IBM. She must have seen him half a dozen times. Boardman, then studying to be a psychiatrist, was even considering going to work for him, perhaps run his practice. And so, she thought, wouldn't it be just perfect if on a sunny Hamptons weekend Dr. Atkins would stop by for a buffet lunch by the pool? He showed up in slacks, which didn't matter, even if most everyone was in bathing suits or sarongs. The real panic was, *Oh, my goodness, the buffet.*

"It was like having a guru around," said Pitt in a panic. The grilled salmon and grilled chicken—those were okay. But hide the Tate's carrot cake and the brownies. Atkins, in any case, had the peaches, and then brought out a few of his Atkins dessert bars, which he cut into pieces.

Of course, at lunch Atkins did nothing but talk about the diet. "Just give him the chance; joked Veronica. He seldom talked about anything else. At the Pitts', every question was directed at him. "Can I eat this?" "Can I have wine?" "Did you, after all these years, have a gratifying feeling of *I told you so*?" "I've had that feeling all along," said Atkins.

Just nine months later Atkins would be dead, his time of triumph cut short. His old foes would resurface. They'd always been necessary enemies. Now, as if they needed him one more time, they called him back to battle, this time posthumously.

ATKINS SEEMED AT TIMES to have invented the diet doctor as type-messianic, brash, smart, embattled and yet, in ways, he'd been the accidental guru.

From his earliest days, he'd wanted to be a traditional doctor. "He was so smart, he skipped a grade," says his mother, Norma, now almost 95. (Her husband died at 84.) He trained at Cornell as an internist. "He was a blue-blood at first; he believed in medical orthodoxy wholeheartedly," says Veronica. Later he'd train in cardiology, though the specialty wasn't for him. He visited a patient at home, saved her life by doing a quick procedure, and, for thanks, was instructed to call her physician in the morning. "He was a technician to her, providing a service," remembers Stuart Fischer, who worked with Atkins for eight years. "He didn't



and, for thanks, was instructed to call her physician in the morning. "He was a technician to her, providing a service," remembers Stuart Fischer, who worked with Atkins for eight years. "He didn't want to go through life like that."

In 1963, Atkins read about a low-carbohydrate diet in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The conventional wisdom was that a diet low in fats and high in legumes and vegetables helped a person lose weight and stay healthy, unsatisfying and almost un-American as it seemed. But the *JAMA* article argued that the real cause of weight gain wasn't fatty foods but carbohydrates, like pasta. Atkins, a voracious reader of medical literature (he'd never be spotted with a novel), decided to conduct an experiment with the low-carb approach, using himself as a subject. Atkins had weighed 135 pounds in high school; twenty years later, he'd gained almost 90 pounds. Atkins found the low-carb diet easy to stick to—he lost

about 28 pounds in six weeks. For the rest of his life, he said, he never went off it.

In 1972, Atkins published *Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution*—incongruously; the cover seemed to feature a chubby Buddha. Buddy Hackett made fun of it on *The Tonight Show*. (He was, he laughed, dieting on nothing but steak.) The book was an instant best-seller, selling almost a million copies.

Yet, almost from the start, Atkins's diet was dismissed as a dangerous fad. A concerned Congress called him to a hearing on fad diets in 1973, where he was labeled not only bad for your health but impudent. How dare he "impugn the reputation" of the noted doctors who told America that the healthy way to lose weight was to avoid fatty foods? one senator asked.

But, clearly, Atkins had an appetite for controversy. He was pugnacious, almost aggressively open-minded, and also, says his wife, "a showman" (He had spent a summer as a comic waiter in the Catskills.) And so, unable to gain the acceptance he craved, he set out on another tack. "Okay, I'll be the best enemy you ever had" is the way his wife describes his attitude. He seemed to taunt the low-fat propo-

nents, like Nathan Pritikin, whose diet book, *The Pritikin Program for Diet and Exercise*, appeared in 1979, and later Dean Ornish, and particularly the vegans

Diet is a lifestyle issue, social as much as medical, as much a subject of the dinner party as the examining room. And though scientists dismissed him, his message appealed, for instance, to people who eat. After all, look at how the low-fat side wanted you to live. Like puritans! They made you count calories and cut out delicious, high-fat foods. Dieting, they seemed to say, took vigilance, effort, exercise, suffering. Dieting, in this version, required moral fiber, as well as other kinds. In contrast, Atkins seemed a libertine. "Eat until you're full—without counting calories," said the good doctor—(everything you want, except carbs. Vegetarians pushed legumes, whole grains. Atkins offered an all-American lineup: pork chops, steak, cheese. One of his favorite things to cook was what he called

an "internalized cheeseburger"—cheese on the inside—and no bun.

But aren't whole grains important? "To cereal manufacturers," said Atkins.

Vegetarianism? Atkins made it seem so boring. "If people want to go on Mr. Pritikin's diet—it was largely vegetarian—and eat beans and peas to lose weight," Atkins said, "that's fine."

Atkins goaded the vegetarians, posing in front of a dining-room-size table of chops and steak. Of course, Atkins also said, "I eat more vegetables than the average vegetarian." Still, Atkins made his diet sound like luxury, cramping a person's style as little as a Cadillac. And by the way, he said, it hadn't harmed his patients' blood pressure, cholesterol, or cardiovascular system—though there wasn't scientific proof to support this.

On the *Tomorrow* show in 1981, Atkins appeared with Pritikin, who'd developed his diet after a diagnosis of heart disease at the age of 41. (Diet doctors weren't just healers, they were seekers too. No wonder this was personal.) Onstage, the two diet gurus screamed at each other.

When Pritikin charged that Atkins's diet "sets you up for heart disease and stroke ... and clogs your arteries," Atkins had had enough. He threatened to sue Pritikin for \$5 million for slander. This got him *more* attention—which likely was the point. Even afterward, Atkins and Pritikin continued to go on TV together, a tandem always on the verge of a fight. (One TV exec compared their performance to the televised encounter between Jerry Falwell and Larry Flynt.)

And for Pritikin, another diet martyr, albeit a more self-conscious one, death seemed just the opportunity he needed to prove his point. He killed himself in 1985 at the age of 69 after a recurrence of leukemia. But before he went, he directed that his body be autopsied. A letter to the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported the results: low cholesterol and a near absence of clogged arteries. It's a finding his disciples trumpet to this day.

Screaming on TV might be great entertainment, but it was hardly favored medical style. A doctor ought to be measured and stand behind his research. But Atkins was a physician treating patients, not a scientist. He flouted medicine's foundational pieties. "We weren't so tied to evidence-based medicine," explained Fred Pescatore, one of Atkins's associate medical directors. "We were into experiential medicine. We tried different things and saw what works with our patients."

A well-developed clinical instinct is, of course, respected in medicine. Good doc-

tors were supposed to have a nose for the right approach, even if it seemed out of the ordinary. Atkins, though, took this to an extreme. He seemed willing to try anything that might work. There was hardly a disease that he didn't treat at his center on 152 East 55th Street—multiple sclerosis, cancer, HIV, chronic fatigue, depression, arthritis, you name it. "I don't want to be known as the diet doctor," he told his wife.

Of course, there may have been another reason. In the eighties, low-fat reigned, which wasn't good for Atkins's diet business. In fact, by the nineties, he'd changed the name of his business to the Atkins Center for Complementary Medicine and began to supplement his Western training with the medicine of other cultures. At one point, his center had 90 employees and may have been the largest alternative-medicine facility in the world. Even here, however, he was ostracized. After all, what self-respecting alternative healer would proselytize for meat?

Still, Atkins employed herbalists, acupuncturists. ("I thought he was a quack" at first, says Jacqueline Eberstein, a nurse at the center.) He often used himself as an alternative-medicine guinea pig. During meetings, he sucked on a metal lollipop to build his immune system, and had his irises examined by an iridologist. In the early nineties, he administered ozone intravenously, a cancer treatment that he'd read was being tried in Europe. When, in 1993, a 77-year-old woman with recurrent breast cancer had a bad reaction—numbness in one leg, blurred vision, dizziness, weakness in both legs—Atkins's medical license was summarily suspended. A court reinstated his license, but a bruising administrative trial followed. He considered it persecution by traditional medicine.

By the mid-nineties, high-protein diets were making a comeback, and Atkins was in the lead. His *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*, published in 1992, became a best-seller a few years later. And Atkins Nutritionals, the company he'd formed in 1998 to create food products for those on his diet, was the real moneymaker, its revenues eventually reaching a reported \$100 million.

Atkins understood that controversy or at least the publicity it generated moved product. As one of his lawyers, Sam Abady, explains, "He was a visionary in terms of understanding the medical marketplace." Long before the pharmaceutical industry launched ad campaigns aimed directly at consumers, Atkins "understood that consumer interest would

have to be accommodated by the medical industry," says Abady.

He understood the consumers on a more personal level, too, and they returned the favor, treating him like a savior. He claimed to have seen 50,000 patients in his career; entire families came to him. Many sought him out as last resort. They formed a loyal following and, sometimes, called his detractors "pharisees." (Even the woman who'd had the bad reaction from ozone returned.)

Soon, friends were urging Atkins to give up his medical practice. Plus, his wife wanted him to think about retirement. "I nagged him," she said. By 2002, he hired new management for Atkins Nutritionals. One of its early moves was to reduce the medical practice, eventually to just fourteen people.

Atkins hadn't ever designated a sue censor. He'd talked to Samantha Boardman, the socialite who'd been so intrigued with him that summer, about coming onboard, perhaps taking over. He wanted her to start showing up, getting involved.

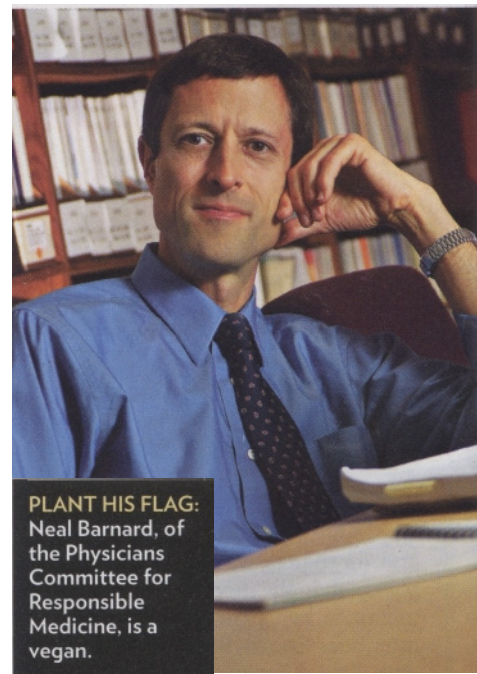
A couple of friends, interested in stabilizing him financially, offered to buy Atkins Nutritionals. Bob Meister, vice-chairman of Aon Corporation and a friend from Atkins's bachelor days, put a deal together with Gary Winnick, former head of Global Crossing. "We were going to give him a valuation of \$50 million and make him a partner," says Meister. "Bob was never interested in pursuing money. It was frustrating to all of us." (Plus, his businesspeople figured the company was worth more.)

Atkins didn't want to give up his practice. Socially, Atkins could be shy; he didn't have many close friends. But doctoring came easily. Even as a 72-year-old, he saw patients three times a week, usually arriving before 8—the other two days he often wandered into the office to read journals or, simply, to hang out. And the doctor was always in, even if he was out. "Wherever we went, people wanted advice and he'd give them consultations," says Veronica.

Finally, in November 2002, his season of vindication, Atkins agreed to buy a place in Palm Beach. They'd have it renovated, ready to occupy in the spring. Meantime, on occasional visits, they stayed at Meister's 11,000-square-foot estate with the Renoirs and Picassos on the wall—"Wow," Atkins said, not overly impressed. Pricey art wasn't the sign of status he sought.

ON APRIL 6, 2003, TWO DAYS before his calamitous fall, Atkins boarded a private plane, a Gulfstream belonging to Steve Ross, chairman and CEO of the Related Companies, heading home from Palm Beach to New York. Meister, who'd arranged the ride with Ross, said Atkins had a lot on his mind. He'd just received amazing news. Goldman Sachs was part of a deal to offer \$533 million for Atkins Nutritionals, of which Atkins owned 80 percent. Atkins was ready to sell. On the plane, the talk turned to patients. Ross's two daughters had juvenile diabetes. He wondered if Atkins could help. Atkins assured them he could. He said to send them along.

Two days later, a Tuesday, Keith Berkowitz, an internist who'd worked at



PLANT HIS FLAG: Neal Barnard, of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, is a vegan.

the Atkins Center for a couple of months, was on his way to work. At about 7:20 A.M., he saw a crowd hovering around a fallen figure on East 55th and Third. Pushing through, Berkowitz spotted Atkins. There was ice nearby. There'd been a late-winter storm that weekend. He was bleeding heavily from the back of his head. Berkowitz took the ambulance with Atkins, who soon lost consciousness.

Atkins would spend nine days at Cornell Medical Center in intensive care, swelling to 258 pounds as fluids were administered. Atkins had never been thin—"He disguised his weight under layers of clothing," said Fischer. Still, he wasn't fat. Meister had put him on the scale just a few days earlier,



CHEWING THE FAT: Atkins debating low-fat nutritionist Nathan Pritikin, on WNBC's *Live at Five* in 1981.

weighed under 200. Veronica, inconsolable, sat by his bedside. Unable to look at his bloated hands—"Like ham hocks," she thought—she whispered in his ear, asking for a sign that he could hear. On the ninth day, she agreed to pull the life support, letting him die.

Atkins was quietly cremated. No autopsy had been performed, an omission that became important later. "I knew what he died of," Veronica explained, "and also I wasn't thinking clearly. Plus, the idea of having him cut up to bits and pieces ... I felt then, I still feel, I have nothing to prove"

At his memorial service—tickets were advertised in the newspaper on a first-come-first-served basis—at an undisclosed location that turned out to be the 92nd Street Y, the theme was "To Dream the Impossible Dream."

At the moment of his death, Atkins was perhaps the most famous diet doctor in history. And though this TV showman, this shouter, this exaggerator—even his loyal staff said so—seemed an unlikely figure to turn the nutrition world on its ear, that's just what he seemed to have done. He'd outlasted Pritikin, bested McDougall, displaced Ornish. His opponents—was it possible?—seemed bereft

FOR VEGETARIANS, ATKINS'S triumph had created a special suffering. "It's insane," says John McDougall, 56, after returning from windsurfing one afternoon. "I consider this terribly wrong" Not only does it seem bad nutrition to him—"It will rot your arteries," he says—it seems bad values, not to mention bad business. McDougall, author of the once best-selling *The McDougall Program*, was told by his publisher to do Atkins-like high-protein diet books. "You're of the eighties," they told him.

Certainly, the matter has not been definitively settled in Atkins's or in anyone's favor. The low-fat theory has, obviously, failed to stem the crisis of obesity in America. But nothing has yet proved the low-carb hypothesis. A recent six-month trial out of Duke showed that a low-carb diet allows more weight loss than the American Heart Association-approved low-fat diet. But what does six months show? Rigorous, long-term testing of the low-carb diet is still awaited.

In any case, for the loose network of veggie docs, the crucial issue, the one that could win the battle, isn't weight loss, but heart risk. Meat, they contend, would raise a person's bad cholesterol, which

they say promotes heart disease. (Atkins agreed that his diet elevated cholesterol, but most important, he said, it elevated the good cholesterol, which appears to protect against heart disease.)

Twenty years ago, as a resident at St. Vincent's, Neal Barnard founded Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, which grew to include 5,000 vegetarian-minded docs. Barnard, who grew up in a cattle-ranching family, had his vegetarian epiphany after assisting at an autopsy. (Later that day, ribs were the special in the cafeteria.) Barnard soon became convinced that meat was not only unappetizing, it was a danger. "Meat consumption is just as dangerous to public health as tobacco use," he said, completing the familial heresy. Plus, of course, meat wasn't nice. The Physicians Committee didn't particularly like lab experiments on animals, a stand it shared with the militant PETA, for which Barnard was a medical adviser.

For physicians like Barnard and McDougall, Atkins was as near to evil as you could get in a white coat. And the Physicians Committee attacked him with near religious zeal. Barnard started AtkinsDietAlert.Org, a Website that says the Atkins diet has "spread like a virus." He tracked claims that the Atkins diet caused illness. (And he had his own book: *Eat Right, Live Longer*.) The battle got personal. "Okay, chubby," McDougall had wanted to call him during their last debate. (His wife talked him out of it.)

Then one day, ten months after Atkins's death, the vegetarians—actually, Barnard and McDougall are vegans—had cause to rejoice. Richard Fleming, a Nebraska cardiologist, wrote to the New York City medical examiner requesting a copy of its report on Atkins (Fleming had previously published a report asserting that blood flow to the heart decreased after an Atkins diet - "Flawed," Atkins's people shot back.) When the report came in the mail, he forwarded it to the Physicians Committee, which gleefully distributed it.

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MAD AT COW DISEASE: Vegan M.D. John McDougall

According to the medical examiner's scribbled notes, Atkins appeared to have had a history of heart disease, just as the anti-Atkins faction had predicted. The document noted a myocardial infarction, hypertension, congestive heart failure. It was the revenge of the vegans. "He had the diseases you get from eating a rich Western diet," snaps McDougall, as if engaged in a culture war, which perhaps he is.

The case of one person-even if that person was Robert Atkins-hardly proves anything about the health effects of a diet. Genetics probably plays a predominant role in heart disease-Atkins's father had coronary-artery disease. But this was as much about public perception as science. And hadn't Atkins offered himself as an example of how far a person could indulge and still enjoy good health? "He used his health as a marketing tool," said Barnard. The Atkins people were furious. "Des-

Patrick Fratellone, his cardiologist and employee. "Pretty good for a man who eats that much fat."

In a statement after his death, his wife confirmed, "Robert did have some progression of his coronary-artery disease in the last three years of his life, including some new blockage." She mentioned a secondary artery and a procedure to remedy the situation. He was on heart-rhythm medication as well.

Of course, while the vegans and the meat eaters skirmished, other players assembled for another kind of clash: the competition for Atkins's profitable mantle. His former employees all seemed to want to follow the master, his good works, and his substantial earnings. "Everybody's trying to capitalize on Bobby's success," said Veronica.

There was the former associate medical director, Fischer, who had launched what he called the Sutton Place Diet, a

"I'M NOT GOING TO ALLOW them to persecute Bobby anymore. Thank God, I have the wherewithal to do it."

perate people," Stuart Trager, an orthopedist employed as Atkins's spokesman, called the opponents. Still, Atkins and his people have not always been at their best when delivering answers about the doctor's own health. "Their version of the truth is a moving target," says Barnard. "This peculiar behavior I attribute to a lack of fiber in their diet," he adds in a pointedly vegan gibe. "You think I'm kidding."

It would have been the simplest thing to release medical records. Instead, Atkins and associates seemed to step carefully, responding politically that nothing diet-related was the matter with Atkins's health-and they denied emphatically the medical examiner's report. Atkins himself treated his cardiac arrest as a very minor incident-"It didn't last very long," he said, as if he hadn't been revived with on-the-spot CPR and hadn't spent a week in the hospital. On emerging, he went right on TV. He told Katie Couric, "So what are they [my critics] going to say now that they know I don't have any blockages?" Atkins explained that he had an enlarged heart due to an infection, which Veronica thought started as a sinus infection.

Of course, Atkins did have blockage. In 2001, his coronary arteries were perhaps 30 to 40 percent blocked, according to

plan to deliver gourmet Atkins-style meals to your door-a practice Atkins had pioneered.

Fred Pescatore had set up his own center, Partners in Integrative Medicine, with other former Atkins employees. Pescatore wanted to take the next step, and that includes separating the good fats from the bad fats. The latter category, says Pescatore, include Atkins's beloved bacon, which isn't good for you. "Atkins had to exaggerate because he was on the front line," says Pescatore.

Dr. Keith Berkowitz, former business director for Atkins, has his own center as well. And Fratellone, who has an integrative heart practice and a book in the works, believes that *he* is the truest incarnation. "His dream is being fulfilled in what I do," he says.

"They all know better than Bob," sniffs Veronica. (Most annoying to her seems to be the South Beach Diet, a descendant of Atkins that adjusts the prescription-low-carb and less fat-and now competes with Atkins on the best-seller lists.)

"If the egos get out of it, it will be better, she says. Though the chances of that seem slim. Even the Atkins side is hardly altruistic. His publisher, HarperCollins, has two more books planned from Atkins, one of which Atkins worked on.

VERONICA'S PLACE IN PALM BEACH isn't far from the Meisters, or the Boardmans, or South Beach. Veronica walks most places. Palm Beach- "it's like a spa," she says in amazement one day. Her apartment is modest by Palm Beach standards, a single bedroom, and spare, a few pieces of furniture from the Hamptons, from Barneys, and, so far, no paintings. She serves guests coffee, a hazelnut blend from her favorite place in the Hamptons, with Splenda, a sugar substitute.

Veronica seems to have two modes these days. In one she is calm, vague, indefinite. "I am depressed," she says over lunch at a local restaurant-she orders crab cakes on arugula. She leads a quiet life. There are no poolside lunches these days; Bobby's season has passed.

At times, Veronica, who is blonde with pale hazel eyes, doesn't seem to quite know what to do with herself. In the afternoon, she'll take a Pilates class. "I love Pilates," she says. She takes long walks, amazed that people sweetly say hello.

Then, standing on her terrace-the Florida air is thick today, rain is coming she seems to enter her other mode. In this one, she is steely, fierce, combative, the Atkins who always was more offended by the attacks than her husband was. She has, she says in this mode, one principal task: fending off the vegetarians, the copycats, the pretenders, the low-fatters, the high-carbers, all those who ever "looked down their nose at him."

"If anybody attacks Bobby, God help them," she says. "I will not allow them to continue to persecute Bobby any longer. He doesn't deserve it," she says, her emotions momentarily taut, focused. "Thank

God, I have the wherewithal to do it.

Veronica, it appears, will tend the legacy, with all its complications. She has funded a foundation, the Robert C. Atkins Foundation. In October 2003, Atkins Nutritional sold for over \$500 million. She will give \$50 million to the foundation, and with it will prove, once and for all, that Bobby was right. "I'll beat them through research," she says.

And she's thinking of other things to do with the money, things that would secure his reputation, enshrine it beyond the reach of nasty critics. She's thinking of the very place that shunned him: the halls of traditional medicine. How about, she thinks, an Atkins wing at his alma mater, Cornell, which shortly before his death invited him in, finally, to deliver a lecture. "He was so happy with that," she says.

Additional reporting by Claire Sulmers and Collin Campbell.