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## **I Inject, Your Honor**

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NO ONE FOUGHT HARDER TO RID THE PANHANDLE OF ITS METHAMPHETAMINE EPIDEMIC THAN DISTRICT ATTORNEY RICK ROACH. IN RETROSPECT, AN ADDICT MAY NOT HAVE BEEN THE BEST GUY FOR THE JOB.

HE WOULD STRIDE INTO THE COURTHOUSE in a perfectly pressed gray suit, every hair on his head brushed into place, and he would bound up the stairs to his fourth-floor office, usually skipping a step or two at a time. Sometimes, as soon as he'd throw open the office door, he'd start waving his arms at his assistants. "Let's go! Let's go!" he'd say in a booming voice. "Let's get to work!" His name was Rick Roach, and in the Texas Panhandle, where he was the district attorney of a five-county region east of Amarillo, he was fondly regarded, in the words of one citizen, as "the enforcer"—a zealous, hard-as-nails prosecutor who had devoted himself to putting drug traffickers and longtime drug abusers behind bars.

Week after week, he would tell juries that the time had come to take a stand against the scourge that was ruining the lives of so many Panhandle residents. The jurors would stare into Roach's eyes, and they almost always did just what he wanted, returning guilty verdicts with sentences ranging from 40 to 99 years. At the conclusion of each successful prosecution, Roach would make himself available for interviews with reporters ("The good citizens are fed up with drugs!" he declared after one victory), shake hands with the jurors and other well-wishers, and return to the district attorney's office, where he would walk back to his own private office and shut the door behind him.

While sitting behind his grand desk, he would sometimes open a drawer. He would take out a syringe. He would roll up his shirtsleeve or pull down his pants. Then, the powerful, drug-busting district attorney of the Thirty-first District of Texas would inject himself with a large dose of methamphetamine, one of the most highly addictive and destructive of all drugs, and lean back in his leather chair, relishing a heart-pounding euphoria that would last for ten hours or more.

IF YOU READ A NEWSPAPER long enough, there comes a point when you begin to believe that no public scandal can catch you by surprise. But when the story broke in January that 55-year-old Rick Roach had been arrested in a courtroom by a team of FBI agents, charged not only with possession of cocaine and methamphetamine but also with the intention "to distribute or dispense" those very drugs, the good people of the rural Panhandle found themselves shaking their heads in disbelief. "What's so shocking is that Mr. Roach truly was on a mission to get rid of our drug problem," said Lonny Robbins, a minister who is also the mayor of Pampa (population: 17,000), the largest town in Roach's district. "He told us he wouldn't be slapping drug offenders on the wrist, and he didn't. He truly seemed to be getting things done for us."

Indeed, area newspapers had long praised Roach's efforts to rid the Panhandle of drug crime—"Anyone thinking about getting involved in the drug trade should avoid Gray, Hemphill, Lipscomb, Roberts, and Wheeler counties," the Amarillo Globe-News gushed—and he was so popular among the mostly conservative, churchgoing Republican voters in his vast district that he had run unopposed the previous year for reelection. Since his arrest, Roach has made little attempt to explain his public meltdown—he declined all requests for interviews from Texas publications, including TEXAS MONTHLY—but had residents of the five counties examined Roach's past, they might have realized that his downfall had been a long time coming. "He was an outlaw, plain and simple," said John Mann, the former district attorney whom Roach replaced. "Maybe what's so amazing about all this is that he was able to keep that side of him hidden for so long."

Raised in Pampa—his stepfather was a respected high school football coach and principal, and his mother worked at a bank—Roach attended Texas Tech University, where he studied accounting and then received his law degree. As a young man, he liked to drink and he loved to mouth off. In 1975, when he was arrested in Lubbock for driving while intoxicated, the police officer noted in his report

that Roach had asked him "what the goddammed hell I was picking on him for, why didn't I go over in East Lubbock and pick on those sorry bastard niggers and the people that ought to be in the jailhouse?"

He hardly seemed destined to become a famous prosecutor of criminals. After practicing law in various Panhandle towns, in the late eighties he ended up in Breckenridge, where he was indicted for oil-field theft after a neighbor accused him of tapping his gas line. (The charges were dismissed when Roach agreed to pay restitution.) He then moved with his wife and three sons to the town of Miami (population: 600), in Roberts County. According to an FBI affidavit, it wasn't long after moving to Miami that he "allegedly checked into a drug rehabilitation center for a cocaine addiction." What's more, his personal life seemed to be deteriorating. His wife, Cynthia, filed for divorce twice, at one point citing Roach's "ungovernable temper."

But both times she dropped her complaints, and Roach did appear to be turning his life around. He ran for county attorney of Roberts County, a part-time job that required him to prosecute anyone arrested for a misdemeanor, and was elected "because he was the only attorney in the county," said Tom Grantham, an accountant who befriended Roach. "He had a real bad temper, and he could cuss a blue streak, but he also had the ability to be very charming, and no one could accuse him of being lazy when it came to doing his job."

Nor could anyone accuse him of lacking ambition. In 1996 Roach ran as a Republican for district attorney of the Thirty-first District. The DA was responsible for prosecuting all the felony cases in the district's five counties. It too was a part-time job, because only about 34,000 people lived in those counties. Though Roach lost that year to the incumbent, John Mann—a big, barrel-chested Democrat who lived on a ranch and who filed personal-injury lawsuits when he wasn't prosecuting cases—he ran again in 2000, this time declaring that residents of the district needed a full-time attorney to fight drug-related crimes. It was a persuasive argument, particularly because methamphetamine, once popular with motorcycle gangs and long-haul truckers, was rapidly becoming the drug of choice in rural Texas. Meth labs were sprouting up along back roads and in abandoned oil fields, and the number of addicts seeking help at public treatment centers in the Pampa area alone was skyrocketing.

Although Mann changed parties before the election to run as a Republican, he didn't do much campaigning. "I really didn't expect people to take Rick Roach seriously," he admitted. After all, when Roach had run for DA the first time, he'd hardly been a promising candidate. One of the area newspapers, the Canadian Record, had reported that he had undergone treatment for alcohol abuse and taken medication for clinical depression, and Roach had openly discussed his drug problems. "I succumbed to peer pressure and ended up getting involved with marijuana and some amphetamines," he had told the Record. "I feel like it was wrong, that it was a mistake."

But by 2000 it was clear that many residents had accepted his apology—"Out here, we always want to believe the best of someone," Pampa's mayor Robbins said—and Roach, who was now performing periodically with a Christian gospel band, locked up what Mann described as "the churchgoing vote" and narrowly won the election. Almost immediately after taking office, he was meeting with chiefs of the local police departments and with Department of Public Safety troopers, proclaiming that he wanted to nail all the drug criminals, from the small-time dealers who were selling baggies of marijuana to the drug mules who were driving cocaine-laden vehicles down the stretch of Interstate 40 that cut through his district.

In truth, an assistant prosecutor did almost all of the courtroom work. Roach, who had little experience trying cases, tended to show up for opening or closing arguments, swaggering John Wayne-like into courtrooms, his shoulders thrown back and his square jaw sticking out. Nevertheless, after each drug conviction, he had a press release typed up about what he had done. When a Pampa man was sentenced to 99 years in prison for selling meth to an undercover DPS officer, Roach's press release praised the jury for doing "what needed to be done to deter others from selling drugs and ruining lives." Another press release announced that he had persuaded a jury to give a habitual DWI offender in his district a life sentence. The Amarillo Globe-News was so impressed that it declared in an editorial: "We gain hope from this story because of the hard work of prosecutors like Rick Roach."

BY 2003, HOWEVER, other things were beginning to be whispered around the county courthouses about Roach. He was showing up late to work, people said, and when he did arrive, he often locked himself in his office. He also would explode at employees over trivial matters or question them heatedly, convinced they'd been talking behind his back. Law enforcement officers he met with began noticing that he was losing weight and that his skin was sallow. His teeth were getting gray, and he was constantly popping breath mints, the very thing that methamphetamine addicts often do to get the chemical taste of the drug out of their throats. "Yes, there were times when we all looked at one another and said, 'Something's not right here,'" said a detective for the Pampa police department, who asked to remain anonymous. "But no one came right out and said, 'I think Rick Roach is on drugs.' I mean, this was the district attorney! You don't say something like that about the district attorney out here unless you've got some hard evidence."

A couple of DPS officers began to wonder if Roach was into other criminal behavior, especially when he offered them Rolex watches as an incentive for making more money seizures when they stopped drug traffickers along I-40. Roach had realized that because 30 percent of any money confiscated by the DPS went to the prosecuting attorney's office, he could easily fill his coffers. At one point, more than \$3 million in cash seized at arrests had been deposited into bank accounts controlled by his office, and DPS officials suspected that Roach was embezzling some of that money.

No one knows who tipped off the feds about Roach's drug use, but by the fall of 2004 it was clear that an investigation was fully under way. By then Roach's behavior had grown even more bizarre, and FBI agents interviewed people who confirmed that he was obtaining drugs from defendants and local dealers. At a court hearing that was being handled by the chief assistant DA, Lynn Switzer, Roach suddenly arrived in the courtroom, took a seat, and began murmuring to himself, repeating everything that was being said by the attorneys and the judge. At a courthouse dedication in Wheeler County, he showed up unshaven and jittery and "talking nonstop in a profane manner about a high school football game," said Switzer. According to an FBI affidavit, an employee walked in on Roach surfing pornographic Web sites on his office computer, including one that showed a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girl engaged in sexual acts. And then there was the day Roach arrived at the DPS drug lab in Amarillo with a court order authorizing him to receive a stash of ecstasy tablets along with a whopping two kilos of cocaine, which he said he would be using to train police dogs. The request was unusual because there were only two police dogs in Roach's district, and they would hardly need two kilos of cocaine for their training. Furthermore, ecstasy doesn't have the kind of organic properties that allow police dogs to sniff it out.

But because of his popularity, no attorney dared challenge Roach when he ran for reelection in November. Besides, almost all of his supporters believed he was doing just fine. If he was acting somewhat strange, they said, it was no doubt due to the troubles he was having again with his wife. The two had recently separated, and Roach was staying at a Pampa apartment rented by the district attorney's office.

FBI agents, meanwhile, decided to recruit a secretary in Roach's office named Rebecca Bailey, whose job it would be to win over Roach's confidence and determine if he was using drugs. According to the affidavit she filed later, she got an eyeful. She watched him inject himself with methamphetamine twice at his apartment and saw him once with it at the office. And though Bailey would not talk to reporters about her experiences with Roach, one source closely involved in the investigation said that the astonished secretary—who was not, the source stated, romantically involved with Roach—had even witnessed the district attorney inject himself in the penis.

WHEN FBI AGENTS in plainclothes arrested Roach in January as he walked into a courtroom in Pampa to conduct a forfeiture hearing, he acted appropriately shocked and then spent about a week heatedly proclaiming his innocence. His respected Amarillo-area attorney, Bill Kelly, the former head football coach of West Texas State University (where else but in Texas does a football coach become a defense attorney?), did his best for his client. When it was learned, for instance, that the FBI had also discovered that Roach had accumulated more than thirty firearms, including revolvers, semiautomatic pistols, and rifles, Kelly told an Associated Press reporter that the gun collection was not unusual. "This is hunters' country," he said with a straight face.

But Kelly quickly cut a deal with the U.S. attorney's office to drop the indictments regarding the drug possession and the intention to distribute in return for Roach's resigning his office and pleading guilty to a single charge of possessing a firearm while illegally using drugs. Roach then made a few rambling comments to the New York Times—the only publication he spoke to—trying to explain his actions. He said that he had only returned to drugs in the summer of 2004 (investigators believe he started at least a year earlier), after coming across a crack pipe in a drug dealer's car. He continued taking drugs, which he did admit he regularly stole from police seizures, to deal with depression and impotence. In what has to be one of the great mea culpas in Texas political history, he even confessed that he had been so thrilled with the way he felt when he mixed methamphetamine with Levitra, a medication designed to enhance sexual potency, that he had thought about patenting it. "I just sort of, you might say, went nuts," he said. "I made irrational and wrong decisions."

Today, Roach has been ordered to remain within Potter and Randall counties and is staying at his mother and stepfather's home, in the town of Canyon, until his sentencing sometime this spring. (He could be sent away for ten years.) His wife has filed for divorce again. Roach has been using his mother's telephone to call old friends, telling them that he is remorseful and that he wishes he could take it all back, the very kinds of statements that used to make him chuckle when he heard them from defendants in the courtroom.

Meanwhile, assistant district attorney Lynn Switzer has been appointed to replace Roach as DA of the Thirty-first District. One of her top priorities: getting drugs off the streets. "Obviously," said Switzer, "we've been taught a pretty important lesson once again about the impact that drugs can have on someone's life. This whole thing is just a tragedy. A sick tragedy, but a tragedy."