ERIC AMOATEG WAS ESCORTED BY A MARSHAL into Judge David Trager’s courtroom, in the Eastern District of New York. A dark patch of a budding mustache had appeared on his round face. He scanned the courtroom and then stood before Trager with a defeated look. His white T-shirt and prison khakis were a far cry from the suits and the rich African-print cloths he had been wearing only a month before. Amoateng was no longer the honorable and quiet philanthropist and Member of Parliament from Nkoranza North.

On the morning of November 12, 2005, the fifty-six-year-old Amoateng was arrested for smuggling $6 million worth of heroin into the United States. Amoateng and his two accomplices were nabbed in an intricate process involving JFK Airport, American Self-Storage, video surveillance, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers.

Nobody saw this coming.

A short, dark man with a small frame, Amoateng was born in Ghana on February 19, 1953. He attended the Nkoranza Anglican School for his O-levels and the Nkoranza Training College for his A-level education in 1973. He became a teacher soon afterward. In 1992, he switched from education to religion at the University of Ghana, Legon, and graduated with a diploma that year.

Before entering politics, Amoateng worked as the marketing manager of Koajay, a company that bought and distributed school supplies. At the same time, he was the chief of Amoma, a suburb of Nkoranza North, under the title of Nana Amoateng Ameyaw II. As chief, Amoateng spent lavishly on his people: he bought tractors to clear peoples’ farms, funded over ninety students’ educations, and lent out his own money to people he knew could never pay him back. Headlines of articles about him read: “Philanthropists Donate to Orphanage” and “Chief Assisted Students to Register as Voters.”

Samuel Kyei-Boateng, then a reporter for the Daily Graphic, Ghana’s largest newspaper, met Amoateng for the first time in 2002. During an event he was covering in Nkoranza, somebody introduced Amoateng to him as a generous chief and the district manager of the national disaster relief organization. Kyei-Boateng described him as having the air of a rich man, and as being very handsome.

In 2004, Amoateng renounced his chieftaincy in order to take part in the December parliamentary elections. Many in his party wanted to thwart his efforts at running, as they had successfully done in the 2000 elections when he first tried his hand at politics. Word on the street was that the party’s leaders were suspicious of having a rich man in power—very surprising for a country like Ghana, where it’s no secret that money equals power. People get into politics to get rich, or use their money to get into power. This time, however, a delegation of chiefs from Nkoranza North pleaded for him to be given a chance. Amoateng won by a 20 percent margin over his opponent.

In Ghana, people expect to be able to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner in their politicians’ homes. After
Amoateng won the seat, in true Ghanaian politician spirit, he organized a soiree and invited party members and journalists. Kyei-Boateng attended the party with his cameraman. As they were leaving, Amoateng gave them one million cedis to share. The parting gift, roughly equivalent to $100, goes a long way in Ghana.

Amoateng has six children—the oldest is at university in the United Kingdom and the youngest is just about a year old. He owns two houses, valued at $15,000 in total. They are located in a more developed part of the region, and are designed identically in terrazzo, one for each of his two wives.

Kyei-Boateng and Amoateng had a symbiotic relationship—not uncommon for politicians and journalists in Ghana. Amoateng relied on Kyei-Boateng to present a good image of him, while Kyei-Boateng reaped small benefits on the side. Kyei-Boateng recalled a moment in 2004, just before Amoateng won the parliamentary seat: the president of Ghana had appointed Amoateng to be deputy minister of the region where Nkoranza is located.

“I asked Nana, ‘So they didn’t give you minister?’” Kyei-Boateng wanted to know why he’d been made deputy and not full-blown minister. Amoateng’s response was that he was going to become regional minister one day—he was too big to be deputy. Yet Amoateng was very quiet and elusive, especially in Parliament. He was signed onto two parliamentary committees: the House Committee and Constitutional, Legal & Parliamentary Affairs. He never said a word during sessions for either one.

Early in October 2005, Kyei-Boateng was walking to his barber’s at around 5 p.m. when he spotted Amoateng leaning against his pickup truck, talking to a reporter from a rival newspaper.

Amoateng called out and chided him, “So Kyei-Boateng, you’re not going to greet me?” After chitchatting, he asked Amoateng for money to buy beer. Without a thought, Amoateng dug into his pocket and gave him a wad of 200,000 cedis. A bottle of beer costs 7,500 cedis.

The quiet MP took a leave of absence three weeks later, on November 7, 2005. Some said he was going to the United States to buy watches for one of his wives to resell at home. Not long after, papers in Ghana began reporting on two seemingly unrelated stories: a missing MP and the arrest of a prominent Ghanaian involved in drug smuggling.

By November 22, it was confirmed: the missing MP was Amoateng, and he had been arrested.

Amoateng had arrived at JFK Airport in New York on a United Emirates Flight on November 8. He met a friend, Nii Okai Adjei, on the connecting flight from London to New York. Adjei is tall, lanky, and has been described in the Ghanaian papers as a “sea-farer traveling on a Canadian passport.”

A day earlier, seven boxes of pottery had landed at Newark Airport from London, destined for JFK. Airport workers found 136 pounds of heroin packed into the pots. The boxes were sent on to the Continental Airlines storage facility at JFK.

Amoateng, Adjei, and a third man, Gamelie Kuonoe, went to pick up the boxes at the storage facility on November 11. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers were watching them all the while. The three packed the boxes into a black van, which was then, according to the customs report, driven “erratically” by Kuonoe to an American Self-Storage location on Staten Island. After the trio left, immigration agents worked with the storage company to plant a surveillance camera in the hallway close to the unit where Amoateng and his crew had stored their boxes.

On November 12, Amoateng and Adjei went back to American Self-Storage. They opened and inspected the boxes, and after five minutes, they locked up. They began to leave, but were busted. Amoateng tried to claim diplomatic immunity, but this was not going to work.

As of this writing, Amoateng is being detained in the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, from which he is shuffled off to court once every month. His accomplice, Nii Okai Adjei, recently changed his plea to guilty, which means the MP might have to reconsider his own plea. His trial is set for April 26, and if found guilty, he faces twenty years to life in prison.

No one knows for certain if, and for how long, Amoateng was involved in drug smuggling, and whether the proceeds funded his altruism and political career. People were happy to have such a generous benefactor and didn’t question where Amoateng’s money came from. Kyei-Boateng said he thought Amoateng was just a great farmer.

Back in Ghana, parliament is in a huge debate over what to do with his seat. The Ghanaian Constitution allows MPs to stay away from their seats for up to fifteen sittings. Amoateng has already been absent for close to five months. Some are calling for his seat to be filled.

In Nkoranza North, the mood was more than somber when Amoateng was arrested. It was as if Father Christmas had been taken away. In February, his constituency gathered to weed his seven-hundred-acre farm. Even five months after his arrest, at a rally held in his support, one placard read: “Cocaine or No Cocaine Amoateng Is Still Our MP.”