



THEORY OF WAR by JOAN BRADY

Chapter One

How stupid the young are. When I was twenty-two I enrolled in philosophy at Columbia University. I wanted to find truth. I hired helpers to wheel me to it. My professors said, 'Truth exists. It's real and absolute. But the only place it has any meaning is in questions like "Is it going to rain tomorrow?" Wait until tomorrow and see. Then — hey, presto — you've got the truth.' Well, what the hell good is that to me? I live down here, deep down in this wheelchair. I need more.

I'll start in Sweetbrier. I hate the Midwest, and Sweetbrier never was up to much, anyway. Today it's no more than a smattering of shacks tossed down along one of those roads that score the cornfields. Cars don't stop here. Farmers go elsewhere to shop and socialize. You can still make out Benbow Wikin's name over his grocery store if you really want to, but there's hardly anything on the shelves inside. The few patrons that come and go are as creaky and barren as the aged toad of a man who sleeps behind the counter.

Here lie the beginnings of truth.

Sweetbrier started to fall apart in 1923. The Midwest Pacific decided to close the line through the town, which had become not much more than a water stop on the way from Topeka to Jefferson City. This wasn't the way the townspeople looked at it, of course, but people do kid themselves so. The news first appeared in the *Overland Sentinel*. Most everybody refused to believe it until Senator George Stoke — the great windbag himself — told them it was true. History calls this windbag a 'fearless liberal'. Encyclopedias talk

about his reformation of the Senate rules, his campaign against the First World War, his denunciation of the Treaty of Versailles, his federal power projects — one so famous I'm afraid to mention it — and all those farm relief measures. John F. Kennedy wrote him into Profiles in Courage. Even so I say he was a windbag. Worse than that, he was a first-class shit, and the end he came to was too good for him — way too good for him. I'll get to it.

Anyhow, he'd formed anti-railroad committees before anybody else had even absorbed the news. The Overland Sentinel suggested a picnic lunch on the lawns of his mansion, where at this late date in his career, the senator was still growing power as his main crop, manuring it well with money and years of patronage, planting in spring, flourishing in summer, ready for harvest by November and election time, for the festivals, the cider, the corn dollies — the win, the kill — and then plowing under in preparation for years to come. The senator lived just out of town. 'We'll run a full- page ad, Senator, sir,' the gangly young journalist said to him. 'Course we will.' And the senator's eyebrows slithered around on his face like live bait in a fishing bucket.

It would certainly help if I knew what truth is. At Columbia they said they taught a powerful technique for making successive approximations to it; the phrasing is theirs, not mine. Like calculus, they said. But calculus produces something solid, slope of a tangent, orbit of a planet. Ask the philosophers what they produce, and all you get is drivel about weather reports and rain today. Well, as I say, it isn't good enough. Besides, I'll bet truth (whatever it is) is sometimes truer when you make it up. Like that first Saturday in June of 1923, out on the senator's lawn. I wasn't there. I wasn't even born. But I can see the wives of local worthies setting up tables on the grass. I can see the senator's Greek-columned portico, asquat above rolling lawns like a tourist caught out with diarrhea alongside a golf course. Tablecloths flap in the breeze. Wicker baskets disgorge hams, salads, pies, cakes, lemonade, ice cream. The women gossip while they work. Hats bob. Dresses billow. My uncle Atlas knew most of these women. He told me about them years ago, when I was

young, before the tumor in my spine began to grow too big for its bony enclosure. They had names like Hattie and Maude, Gertrude, Carrie and Hope.

At eleven-thirty, guests from all over the state of Kansas begin to arrive. Men in Sunday suits take out hip flasks and add gin to the lemonade. It would have been bootleg gin, wouldn't it? The twenties were Prohibition years, weren't they? Not that it matters. Boys in knickerbocker pants and girls with hoops. Barking dogs. A banner says Sign and Give To Save Sweetbrier and snaps in the breeze. Or perhaps the day was windless. This doesn't matter, either. At twelve, the dancing begins. At one, the senator's vast bulk irons down the grass across the lawn on the way to his speech. 'Timing's everything,' the senator used to say. 'Get the timing right and you got your public fucked before you lay down a penny.' He stops here to shake a hand and there to bend his public smile over a lady's glove. He makes a perilous stoop from the waist to accept ice cream from a girl in ringlets.

Photographs of Senator George Stoke at the age of sixty- two are not pretty. Some fat men look well-contained. Not George Stoke. He oozed. His lower eyelids gaped; they exposed their angry red interiors, which showed not red but black in the grainy black-and-white newsprint of the time; they seeped. The flesh hung over his starched collar as moist and flaccid as rotting pork. He carried a walking stick that ended in an open-mouthed snake with a real snake's teeth and pearls for eyes. He wore a frock coat, shiny at the elbows and cut to a pattern that had gone out of style nearly thirty years before. This frock coat was important to him — and it's important to me and to what goes on hereafter. He'd worn one like it throughout his career. Everybody knew George Stoke's frock coat. Everybody knew his monumental vulgarity, too; he worked hard at it. He jiggled with glee when he shocked the strait-laced and the starched. 'See this litmus paper?' he'd ask one such. 'I'm gonna put it up to your face just like this, right? And by the' — oh, what a deliciously hideous, famous, favorite phrase: oh, how long in my life I've wanted to use it

and never, never once, found just the right meeting of opportunity and, well, what? courage? confidence? — 'And', said George Stoke, Democrat of the state of Kansas, essential bit of plumbing in the United States Senate for more years than anybody could remember — 'by the quivering cunt of the unfucked mother of Christ, it's gonna tell me whose ass you had your nose stuck up last night.'

But it was more than words. This Senator Stoke was a cobra of a politician. He knew what he wanted; he knew what was right for the people who voted him in, and he saw no reason to modify it for anything or anybody at all. He lulled his enemies into comfort, then squeezed them dry and threw away the husk. He'd survived in politics for a long time. He'd been re-elected again and again according to laws that in any civilized society would have ruled him out to begin with. But then there aren't any civilized societies, are there?

