SOME SECRETS are too terrible to tell and in 1946 Britain was a country where most kept silent. What you had seen during the war, what you had sanctioned, what you were still afraid of, was left unsaid. For those bitter years of conflict and separation you buoyed yourself up on sentiment as you crooned ‘*We’ll meet again*’. And we did meet again, thought Alice Rayne, as the wind hammering in from the North Sea slapped her face. Only to discover we have nothing to say to one another.

Pushing the hair from her eyes, she glanced back over the salt marshes. The tide was up, the creek angry and swollen, and she wished she might follow it to the sea. Anything rather than return home. But she’d been gone for more than three hours. She couldn’t delay much longer. So she struck out along the dyked path, then on to the lane that took her back to Oakbourne Hall.

‘Just having a quick walk,’ she’d said to her husband as she’d left. ‘Will you join me?’ He hadn’t answered. She hadn’t expected him to.

<…>

She headed on round the concrete pill-box being usurped by rhododendrons, wincing at the sting of her chilblains. She’d be thirty next month and already her feet were ugly, crooked things, her hands even worse. Veins stood up in her reddened, roughened skin and her engagement ring – a band of stony diamonds that had been in Stephen’s family for two centuries – twisted loosely on her finger.

She thrust her hands in her pockets and kept her head down as the local doctor’s blue Rover pulled up outside the cottage where Mrs Martin was expecting her third child. A victory baby, thought Alice. There were two more due in the village.

She heard the doctor grunting and cursing as he heaved himself out of the car. He’d lost his leg after being taken prisoner at Dunkirk and a stab of self-reproach – don’t whinge about chilblains – spurred her on to the Gate Lodge where Oakbourne Hall, occupying the one sheltered spot for acres around, lay before her.

At dusk, for a few fleeting moments, she could almost persuade herself there had been no war. The gathering darkness hid the empty oil drums dumped under the shrubbery and the sandbags, split and soggy, spilling out all over the terraces. The outlines of the Nissen huts looked almost bucolic, barns for sheltering sheep.

Then a light came on in her husband’s study.

During all those nights of black-out and appalling anxiety she had longed for this, to come home to a house joyously lit-up with her husband, safe at his desk, waiting for her. Yet still she delayed, leaning back against the crumbling gate pillar, bashed to bits by the army trucks that for five years had rolled in and out of the requisitioned estate.

Lights too were on in the Gate Lodge and she could see into the kitchen where Mrs. Harris was standing by the sink, her husband by her side helping with the drying up. Their only son, Ross, had returned after three years on the Arctic convoys. But he was ‘in bits’, Alice’s housekeeper, Mrs. Green, had told her. ‘Just sits by the fire, saying he can’t get warm.’

Three years, thought Alice. Three years of desperation and worry for his parents, missing the youth growing into a man, aching for his loving presence and now… She stopped herself.