After the War – TB

Jenny and Len Page live in East Ham. Their two children are back with them after being evacuated for the war years. Len runs the Cosy Café, Jenny cooks there. Their daughter wants to stay at school and become a teacher. Len insists she's got to work for him, and buys her a bicycle so that she can get back after school more quickly to work in the café.

'Your daughter?' asks a nurse in a brown uniform. 'I am sorry.'
The waiting room outside the ward where Jenny is sitting smells of carbolic and damp and cabbage. Oh, what she would do for a toffee, something to sweeten the anxiety.
Somewhere beyond the double doors lies the girl. They say she's in an iron lung. One moment the girl is on her bicycle, the next she's lying on the pavement, a trickle of red leaving her mouth. And now Jenny waits for news of her daughter from the nurse in the brown uniform. At the end of the waiting, the doctor appears.
'Mrs Page? How long has she been in this condition?'
'It only just come on her.'
He stares down at her. 'I think your daughter has tuberculosis, and I think she must have been ill for some time. We're going to have to put her on the danger list.'
She wants to scream. Tears muster in her eyes. A man with a fancy life and a nice dry house is telling her she doesn't look out for her daughter. In some obscure way, he thinks it's all her fault. The result, somehow, of her choices. He has no idea how few choices there have been.
They called tuberculosis the White Death. In the late 1940s there was still no cure for it in Britain. The most that could be done was to extend the period of the patient's life with rest.
The sanatoria were crowded, lonely places. The routine was as harsh as prison. The rules forbade the sick from touching each other or even from talking much. For month after month they lay, lost and solitary, in long sorrowful lines, many of them waiting to die. The more modern sanatoria bombarded x-rays at the patients' failing lungs. Radiation sickness often finished the job TB started. Other, less well-equipped sanatoria favoured inhalations over fuming bowls of iodides, copper, silica, pig-spleen, aluminium and antimony, lime and gypsum.
For now, the girl is transferred to an isolation unit in a long corridor painted cucumber green. On the second day, her mother is allowed to visit.
The girl lies on a metal bed covered with a starched sheet. Clamps invade her mouth, her throat, her arms.
'Poor little thing,' says the nurse.
'Will she….?' asks Jenny.
'We don't know'

For weeks the girl seems to be walking a tightrope between life and death. The uncertainty eats at her mother's heart. Len spends most of his time avoiding her. This is probably a good thing, as they are in complete disagreement over their daughter's condition. Len simply doesn't believe it. Either the doctors are wrong or the girl is making it up, just to spite him, or to

make him change his mind and let her stay on at school.
The girl's condition gradually improves. She's taken off the iron lung and sent to a sanatorium. For month after month she lies immobile. Then slowly she begins to sit up. By the following summer she is well enough to shuffle round the ward on unsteady feet. But the doctors say it will be a long time before she is ready to come home.
Letting herself into the Cosy cafe Jenny loses herself in the job of scrubbing the floor, and is suddenly startled by the door opening and the bell clanging. There, standing in the entrance, is June, the honey blonde. June says, Well here I am. With the girl away, and all, Len says he needs another pair of hands, so……
And so there she was and there was nothing Jenny could do about it. Now she understands Len's absences, his mood swings and his overheated temper. She understands the moment on the way back from Southend when June's hand slid to Len's knee. It could have been a bump in the road. But it wasn't.
For two and a half years Jenny has been ringing first the hospital, then the sanatorium from the telephone in the back room at the post office, run by Pete and Sally Springer. One day, in the spring of 1948, Jenny puts down the phone and walks into the post office with a smile on her face.
'Good news, Mrs P?' says Pete Springer.
'They're saying she can come out tomorrer, for a bit.'
'Oh that's grand, that is.'

She travels to Wanstead on the bus and picks the girl up in the hallway of the sanatorium. From now on, she thinks, her life will be like breathing out. The girl will return to work in the caff and June will leave and the whole dirty business will disappear.
They sit in the kitchen at Altmore Avenue in silence, not knowing what to say.
'Well I dunno', says Len finally. 'The girl looks all right to me. Can yer peel taters?'
'S'pose', says the girl, caught between defiance and pride.
The following day she is peeling for England and coughing all over the sandwiches.
There is no question now of the girl staying on at school and taking up teacher training. No more is said about the matter. She does her work and eats her tea and even joins in conversations from time to time, but only her body actually lives in Altmore Avenue. The rest of her inhabits a different world altogether.
The following week a cargo of mouldy tobacco is burned at the docks. For two days Silvertown is lost in a smoke sea. It is all too much for the girl. By the end of the second day her breath is stuttering and she begins coughing blood. 'Leave her a while, see how she gets on,' Len says.
Two days after that they have no choice but to take her back to hospital.
Jenny Page watches her daughter go. The girl's return has made no difference. June has lodged herself inside the family like a stain that no soap or scrubbing brush will shift.