Once upon a time, not so very long ago, a young mother and her only child, six-year-old Flora lived in a small village on the edge of an ancient oak forest. Flora was a happy and clever child who spent many hours playing on her own. Her mother, Valorie, worked long hours serving in the Beehive, the village inn, where the landlord lived on his own. He loved flowers and spent many hours growing and looking after very special ones in his greenhouse, which he never allowed anyone to enter. He was a quiet man who, though he rarely smiled, was not unfriendly. He was a good innkeeper with many regular customers who, when they couldn’t think of anything to talk about, used to whisper among themselves why they thought he lived alone and they
decided he had some dark secret to hide and guessed it must be something to do with his flowers. In the summer, he allowed Flora to play in the garden while her mother served drinks to the Beehive customers, but he solemnly warned her that she must never go into the greenhouse at the bottom of the garden where he said he kept his special and delicate plants. Valorie also wondered what the landlord’s secret might be, but didn’t dare ask in case he stopped Flora playing in the garden.

Though Flora knew she must not go into the greenhouse, she was often tempted to, as she could see hundreds of weird and strange plants in the greenhouse, quite unlike any she had seen in the gardens of her friends. Some had large thick fleshy leaves, some had tall hairy stems with dangling leaves that waved in the slightest breeze while others had smaller plants growing off the ends of their long thin branches. Most of the plants were in small earthenware pots, but a few of the taller ones, at the far end of the greenhouse, were in very large pots, just like the ones she had seen in picture books in which Ali Baba and his forty thieves stored their stolen treasures.

Flora was very used to playing on her own in the garden and had invented many games she could play and when she was tired rocked herself backwards and forwards on the swing that hung from a thick branch of a large oak tree that overlooked the greenhouse. She imagined when she looked up into he tree that each branch had its own
family of fairies to whom she gave names and with whom she had long chats on all kinds of private subjects.

When the landlord visited his greenhouse, which he did twice a day, Flora watched him and was she was sure from the way he looked that he talked to his plants. She listened carefully, but he spoke so softly, she couldn't hear what he was saying. If he saw Flora after watering his plants, he always reminded her never to go into the greenhouse. On rare occasions, he smiled at her but that didn't stop Flora from being afraid of him. One day when Flora was peering through the glass to see what the plants were up to, she noticed that a large one in one of the Ali Baba pots had formed beautiful flowers with dark purple petals, just like tulips but ever so much larger. When later in the afternoon, the landlord came to water his plants, she saw him standing a long time in front of the beautiful dark purple flowers and was convinced that he was talking to the plant. He was waving his arms round wildly and looked quite cross, as if he was having an argument.

A few weeks later, Flora was playing alone in the garden and call as she might to her fairies in the oak tree, none of them would answer to their names. She was bored and as there was no one about, she went down to the greenhouse. She walked all around the outside peering through the glass at the plants. When she reached the closed door, she paused and, suddenly, on the spur of the moment, pulled it open and walked in. Her heart raced with fright as
she knew she was doing wrong. She pulled the door close behind her and slowly, very slowly, walked up to the Ali Baba pot containing the plant with the purple flowers, which were now long past their best.

Flora had only been standing by the plant for a moment when she heard a sharp hissing noise behind her. She looked round and screamed in terror when she saw long dangling leaves with tips like cat claws stretching out to scratch her. She turned to run out of the greenhouse, but the long thin leaves stopped her.

"Flora, Flora," she heard a deep voice calling urgently. "Do exactly as I say and you'll be safe. Pick up some of the black and white striped seeds from the ground. They are mine."

The voice was coming from the plant with purple flowers. She bent down and picked up a handful of the black and white striped seeds.

"My seeds are magic seeds," the gentle voice said. "When you swallow one, you’ll become invisible."

Flora wanted to swallow one straightaway and run out of the greenhouse. She was very afraid and knew she would never disobey the landlord again, but the plant with the dark purple flowers spoke to her again.

"Don’t be afraid. You are quite safe with me, but now you're here, I’d like to ask you to do me a great favour,” the plant said. "You see,” the plant began to say and then, “but of course you can’t. I'm not really a plant at
all. I am the brother of the landlord of the Beehive and a wicked fairy who lives deep in the ancient oak forest, turned me into a plant. My brother was also turned into a plant, but he tricked the fairy in to letting him escape. My brother is afraid to help me escape in case the fairy turns him back into a flower again, but you can help me to escape. You will, won’t you?” The plant asked in a pleading voice.

Flora was so frightened, she would have agreed to anything. “What can I do for you?” she asked cautiously, not really believing the plant could be the inn keeper’s brother, but only too willing to help so that she could escape from the greenhouse before the landlord found her. She shivered, too, with the thought that the wicked fairy might come and turn her into a plant as well.

"Listen to me carefully," the plant said. "You know the large open fireplace inside the Beehive, the one with a big black hood on which you've chalked a lovely large fat white cat."

"Yes," Flora nodded, wondering how he knew what she had done.

"Well, wipe off your cat, and draw in its place a pair of large iron gates, big enough for a coach and horse to go through and travel up a driveway and draw a bell with a rope so you could call someone to open the gates for you.”

Flora listened surprised and wondered what more the plant would ask her to do. She wished he would hurry up, as she was anxious in case the landlord or her mother
came looking for her. The plant saw she was worried and told her if her mother came looking for her, she should swallow one of the seed she had picked up to make herself invisible and slip out of the greenhouse. Flora noticed that the leaves had all stopped trying to reach her.

"Now Flora, when you've drawn the gates, and don’t forget the bell and the rope to ring it, stand in front of them and, when your mother is busy serving the customers, swallow one of the seeds you hold in your hand. As soon as you've swallowed the seed, you'll become invisible. Pull the bell rope by the gates you’ve drawn on the fire hood and they will open for you. Step inside and you will see a real palace at the end of a long drive. As you approach, the palace doors will open on to a large spacious hall. Walk into the hall. There is nothing to be afraid of, as there will be nobody there. On the right side of the hall is the library of picture books. The name is written in large letters over the heavy oak door so you can’t mistake it. In the library there are lots of secret picture books. The book I want you to look in is called *Ways to Change People into Plants and Back Again*. It is the only book on the table. Open it on page 9. You do know your numbers. Don’t you?"

Flora nodded her head vigorously.

“All I want you to do,” the plant continued, “is to remember the pictures of all the special things on page 9. They are the things I need to change me back into a man. You’ll find them all in your mother’s kitchen. I want you to
bring, as soon as you can, all the special things and then I'll tell you what you have to do with them. Don’t let anyone know what you’re doing."

The purple flower plant asked Flora to repeat all he had told her and she did so easily, especially remembering the page number, 9.

"When I give you the word, swallow one of the seeds," the plant said. "Make sure you keep the rest of them safe. When you want to be seen again, make this wish, 'Purple Flower, Purple Flower, make me visible'. Swallow a seed now so the wicked plants won't see and frighten you as you leave the greenhouse."

Flora said good-bye to the purple flower plant and swallowed a seed and walked out of the greenhouse. She couldn’t believe she was invisible because she didn't feel invisible, but as none of the leaves stretched out or hissed at her, she assumed she must have been. As soon as she was by the oak tree, she made her wish to become visible again, and immediately heard her mother say, "Oh there you are Flora, where have you been? You must come when I call you. I worry when you don’t answer."

Flora said sorry and followed her mother into the inn where several customers were waiting to be served their drinks. She went over to the fireplace and rubbed her chalk cat off the black fire hood. In its place, she drew the iron gates and the bell with a rope, just as the plant with the purple flowers had told her to do. As soon as she had drawn
them and, while her mother was busy, she unwrapped a seed from her handkerchief and swallowed it. She looked round to make sure nobody was watching and, as the customers were all busy talking together, pulled the bell rope she had just drawn, which made such a large clanging noise, she thought the Beehive customers were sure to hear it, but nobody looked up. The gates mysteriously opened for her and she stepped onto a driveway and saw in the distance a white stone palace set in parkland and bathed in sunlight.

She ran down the drive towards the palace and as she came near saw a long flight of marble stairs, leading to the front door. It was closed. She climbed the steps two at a time and just as she was going to knock on the door, it slowly opened for her. She gazed into the large hall, and stared in wonderment at the tall columns and paintings hanging on the walls, and then she saw a large sign written in gold lettering, 'Picture Book Library'. She went in and was astonished to see thousands of books on hundreds of shelves that went right up to the ceiling. She saw a book on the oak table in front of her and climbed on a chair and made sure it was Ways to Change People into Plants and Back Again.

She turned over the pages one by one until she came to page 9. There were pictures of a spoon of salt, two lump sugars, one packet of crisps one tablespoon of rice and five crunchy nut corn flakes. They were just ordinary things that every mother kept in their kitchen. She thought how funny that such simple things were all that were necessary to turn
a plant back into a man but, when she thought that all these things were the same ones that she ate to make her into Flora, she decided it wasn’t so odd. She made sure she remembered all the things, repeating to herself, a spoon of salt, two lump sugars, one packet of crisps one tablespoon of rice and five crunchy nut corn flakes and then closed the book, thankful that she hadn't had to look for it among the thousands of other books in the library. She left the palace through the front door and ran back along the drive to the gates which again mysteriously opened for her, and she stepped back into the Beehive, saying, 'Purple Flower, Purple Flower, please let me visible’, and found herself back in front of the fireplace, and immediately pretended she was putting the finishing touches to her drawing of the gates.

"Those are handsome gates," one of the customers said with a tankard of beer in his hand. "Who lives there?"

“A very rich man,” Flora said and smiled at him thinking how little adults know about the world of children and she suspected if she told him of her recent adventure, he wouldn’t believe her. She went out in the garden and sat on the swing swaying backwards and forwards while she made sure she remembered all the things the purple flower plant needed, and then played until it was time to go to bed.

The next morning, when she woke up, she repeated out loud the five things she had to take to the purple flower plant. When her mother was busy, she quietly went down to
the kitchen. She collected five crunchy nut corn flakes from the cupboard by the fridge, two lump sugars from the shelf over the sink and found a spoon for the salt and some salt, one packet of crisps one tablespoon of rice from jars by the kettle on the kitchen top. She put them into her school pencil box where she had already hidden the magic black and white seeds. She went happily off to school, but the morning dragged very slowly and she couldn't wait for her mother to collect her and take her back for her lunch at the Beehive. When she had eaten her sandwich and banana, she silently slipped outside to play, carrying her pencil box with her. As soon as she was alone and, while no one was watching, she went to the bottom of the garden, swallowed one of the seeds and entered the greenhouse. She went straight up to the purple flower plant to tell him she had brought the secret things with her and opened her pencil box to show him.

The branches of the purple flowers plant gave a little shake of excitement. “What a clever girl you are Flora. Now listen carefully to what I want you to do: First of all you must crush everything up as small as you can and then spread the mixture evenly over the soil on the surface of the pot in which I’m a prisoner. I must warn you that I won’t be changed into a man immediately - that will take a few days. You’ll know because my leaves will shrivel and change colour and my stem will crinkle and shrink.”
After making sure she understood everything the purple flower plant wanted her to do, Flora opened her pencil box. First she crushed together the five crunchy nut cornflakes and the two lumps of sugar, and then added the spoonful of salt and tablespoon of rice. Lastly she tore open the bag of crisps and after breaking them up into little pieces, mixed them in with all the other things. She showed the brown powdery mixture to the purple flower plant that trembled all over with delight and then she spread it evenly on the soil round his stem.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for rescuing me,” he said. “I’ll soon disappear from your life, but I foretell a great future for you, and one day I'll be able to repay you for all you have done for me. Please don't tell anybody about our secret and, especially, don’t say anything to my brother or even your mother. It’s our secret. Good bye Flora, good bye."

"Good bye Purple Flower Plant. I'll never forget you. Good bye!" Flora replied and still invisible left the greenhouse and sat in the shade of her oak tree. There she said for the last time, ‘Purple Flower, Purple Flower, please make me visible’. Now, she was sure her fairies who lived in the oak tree would all want to hear her wonderful story and she looked up into the branches and called out to them.

The next day, while she was playing in the garden, she watched the landlord going into the greenhouse to visit his plants. He had not been there a moment before he came
rushing out looking very grim and worried, calling Flora's mother urgently to come and look.

"My favourite plant with the purple flowers has got a disease! Its leaves have all gone brown. I don't know what could have happened," he told her shaking his head. "I've been so careful. I've had it for years. I checked it last night. It's had water and its special feed."

That night there was one of the worst storms that any body in the village could remember and Flora’s old oak tree came crashing down on the landlord’s greenhouse. It was totally destroyed and all the Ali Baba pots were demolished and their contents strewn all over the garden. When Flora visited the Beehive with her mother at the end of the day, she rushed out to see the fallen oak. She was sad she would no longer have her fairies to talk to. However, she was sure the fairies would have flown away to safety long before the wind struck because they know when things like storms are going to happen. Flora and her mother watched as the landlord tried to gather the remains of his favourite purple flowering plant, but he only managed to find a few shrivelled stems and roots, which he threw onto his rubbish heap. When the men came to saw up the tree they made a great bonfire on top of the landlord’s rubbish heap, which burned for several days leaving a heap of white ashes. The customers felt very sorry for the landlord who remained dejected for many days, telling everyone that he had lost his most prized plants, but never telling the real
reason why he was so upset. Only Flora understood the secret of the landlord’s distress. She was very happy she had helped the plant with the purple flowers to escape and to this day she has never told anyone what really happened.

Shortly after this the landlord announced he was selling the Beehive. His customers tried to persuade him to stay, but nothing would make him change his mind. He sold the inn and left the area and nobody has heard of him since. The faithful customers moved down the road to the Halfway House and newcomers are still told about the strange landlord of the Beehive. Flora’s mother found a job at The Farmers, which had a lovely garden of trees and shrubs but, the Landlord allowed everyone to use it and so, Flora had no secret place of her where to play and yearned for the magical garden of the Beehive. Now she is much older she still wonder if the lonely inn keeper of the Beehive and his brother got caught by the wicked fairy and planted again in Ali Baba pots.

**Note.** Laura used to live at the Beehive, Riverhead and I told her this fairy story.