Mrs Filiberto's body is not as well-oiled as it used to be, but her mind is as sharp as fresh-cut paper. Her secret is simple: she never writes lists. Mrs Filiberto believes that writing lists addles the brain. She knows. When Mr Filiberto was younger, he wrote lists for everything. There was the produce list in his fruit and vegie shop — with everything counted, weighed and recorded each day. There was the friends list — which grew shorter as time went on. There was the possessions list written in three categories: alphabetical, geographical and financial — in descending dollar value. There was a list for things-done. There was a list for things-to-do: as time went on this list grew and grew until one day Mr Filiberto suffered a stroke, and for a long time he couldn't hold a pen properly. Although he made a pretty good recovery, he never went back to writing lists. Mrs Filiberto will tell you that his brain is permanently addled, and that it wasn't the stroke that did it — it was the lists. She'll even go so far as to say that the list-making caused the stroke, for what is a stroke but a severely addled brain?

Mrs Filiberto has no need for lists. She has an exceptional memory — one that would put an elephant to shame. She can recall — without referring to her diary — every single birthday, wedding anniversary and date-of-passing of every member of her own and Mr Filiberto's families which together comprises — at last count — exactly one hundred and ninety-eight people — and that's not counting the Filibertos' only son and his wife. (Sadly, they have no grandchildren). Every week Mrs Filiberto puts a collection of cards in the post. It's almost a full-time job: she makes them all herself, cutting pictures of kittens and flowers and hearts from old wrapping paper and gluing them onto thick paper folded twice. Each greeting is carefully written in black fountain pen; the message is always the same: "May all your dreams come true."

There are some people who think that Mrs Filiberto's memory is not so spectacular. They think they know more than a few little old ladies who have nothing better to do than to remember other people's birthdays and anniversaries. They think that Mrs Filiberto's life is so dull that remembering other people's special days is a way of filling her own otherwise empty days. These people are wrong. Mrs Filiberto may lead a slow life, but it is certainly not a dull life. Why, for a woman of her age (she'll be eighty-nine next summer) she is very busy, and she copes remarkably well with her responsibilities.

Today is Monday and Mrs Filiberto is out doing the shopping. Every week she ventures out alone by foot. She takes with her a walking stick, more for
emotional than physical support — though she does find it handy for knocking things down from the top shelves at the supermarket. The distance to the shops is little more than a kilometre, but Mrs Filiberto likes to take her time, particularly if the weather’s nice, which it is today. She likes to rest on the wooden bench outside the Immaculate Conception Church where she and Mr Filiberto were married almost seventy years ago. But she seldom reflects upon her wedding here. Being an immensely practical woman, she uses this time to go over her mental shopping list.

Today it reads something like this: plain flour, caster sugar, fresh fettucine, a pound of tomatoes, two pounds of potatoes, bananas, white bread x3, tinned peaches (large), tinned Irish stew, instant coffee, Arrowroot biscuits x4, toilet paper, laundry soap, washing up detergent, bath soap. It’s a big shop this week. The latter three items are rarely purchased; soap and detergent last forever in the Filiberto house. Mr Filiberto bathes only once a week and Mrs Filiberto puts the soap out to dry on the back window ledge whenever the sun is out. Mrs Filiberto usually freshens clothes by airing them rather than washing them and washing up detergent is either used diluted or not at all. Mr Filiberto is in the habit of stirring his cup of coffee and throwing the teaspoon straight back into the cutlery drawer; he does this with the knives too — after smearing butter on his Arrowroot biscuits. The cutlery drawer is full of coffee-stained teaspoons and greasy knives. (Mr Filiberto hates the sight of dirty dishes cluttering the sink.)

Everybody in town knows the Filibertos. They have lived in the same house for fifty-three years. The street — Saint Cecilia Avenue — is lined with huge plane trees that cast a cool, dappled shade in the summer and a loose red and gold carpet in the autumn. The children in the street love to plough through those leaves, squealing and stamping and kicking. (There’s nothing like the crunch of autumn leaves underfoot). The Filiberto house (Number Nine) stands behind a stark black wrought iron fence and stark black wrought iron gates held together with a rusty chain and padlock. There is an intercom button above the stark black letterbox. The front garden is a mass of tangled geraniums, French lavender and dandelions. When Mrs Filiberto tends the garden (which is not often, these days) she leaves the weeds in neat mounds on the patches of clovered lawn. The house itself is a nondescript dirty grey-white, roughly cast. There is a small chunk missing at the lower front left hand corner where Monte — the Filiberto’s only son — had a small accident when he was first learning to drive. The curtains in the front window are torn and drawn, day and night. There is an old blue Volvo in the driveway with a dent in the driver’s door. The back left tyre is flat; it has been like that for so long, it has almost melded to the concrete beneath it. The car hasn’t left the driveway in years. Mr Filiberto hasn’t left the house in years. People can’t remember the last time they saw him walking down the street.
On her way home, Mrs Filiberto stops at Number Five, Saint Cecilia Avenue to pick up a dozen chicken eggs. They are waiting for her in a carton by the letterbox. She checks them and puts them carefully on the child’s seat on the supermarket trolley. At Number Seven she picks freesias and daffodils from the front garden and places these in a small plastic bag she has brought especially. Then she crosses the road to Number Ten. A small basket of spinach and broccoli sits on the front porch. There is a note, but Mrs Filiberto doesn’t have her reading glasses with her, so she folds it and tucks it into her coat pocket for later. She knows that the note is either a request for repairs or an apology in advance for the rent being late. Number Ten are always either requesting or apologising. She gets fruit from Number Twelve whenever she can, but it isn’t easy. Number Twelve is not as cooperative as the rest of them. A group of four or five or six (she can’t be sure how many) students live there. Although the agreement was that they would save the fruit from the trees out the back for the Filibertos, they usually consume it themselves. Mrs Filiberto has to be quick to get anything at all. She guesses that there will be nothing much to pick today — there was nothing much last week — it is, after all, only very early Spring — but she shuffles down the driveway anyway. This is her last stop before she heads home and she likes to rest here a while.

The trolley rattles and clangs on the uneven paving stones. She sees a curtain move in one of the bedroom windows but it doesn’t worry her. The kids are all right. She knows that they laugh at Mr Filiberto and call him “lord-of-the-avenue” and she knows that they laugh at her and call her “the-lord’s-wife” but they never bother her directly. She notices that the grass out the back has recently been mowed. (They don’t seem to mind the mowing.) The nectarine, Granny Smith apple and plum trees are all bare, as expected. Under the fruit trees, the students have left an old leather couch. On it sits a pile of damp newspapers and beside, a couple of empty beer bottles. At the rear right corner of the yard is a compost heap and at the rear left, a mound of twigs and weeds; next to this, an old blue and white striped canvas chair: the collapsible kind you take to picnics and outdoor concerts. Mrs Filiberto eases herself into this chair with a sigh. The sun is in her eyes. She closes them.

Mrs Filiberto has no idea how long she sits here. All she knows is that her feelings follow a cycle: relief, peace, regret, sadness, resignation, and when that cycle is done, she knows it’s time to get up and go home. Sometimes Mrs Filiberto leaves early, before sadness. Sometimes peace is a good time to leave. Some weeks she simply does not feel strong enough to dwell on all those things-she-wishes-she-could-do-but-knows-in-her-heart-of-hearts-she’ll-never-get-around-to-doing.

Back at Number Nine, Mrs Filiberto finds the wrought iron gates open and the chain and padlock hanging loose. Monte is here. She can hear him shouting
from the street. She can hear Mr Filiberto shouting back. They are not having a
disagreement, nor are they deaf — that is just the way the Filiberto men talk.

“What took you so long?” Mr Filiberto shouts. He is sitting at the Formica table
in the kitchen smoking his morning packet of cigarettes. The windows are wide
open but the air is stale. Mrs Filiberto ignores him. Monte goes out to bring in
the trolley goods.

“Ma, how many times do I have to tell you not to take those supermarket
trolleys?” he yells from the front door, “Now I have to take it back again ... How
many times do I have to tell you — ring me early on Mondays and I’ll come and
take you shopping.”

Mrs Filiberto ignores him too. Monte gives her a headache.

“Any fruit from Number Twelve?” Mr Filiberto tosses his cigarette butt into a
chipped Royal Doulton Bunnykins dish. (Monte’s old baby bowl: a gift from Mrs
Filiberto’s mother.)

“No, Mr Filiberto.” Mrs Filiberto is throwing out last week’s ranunculi and
arranging this week’s freesias and daffodils.

“They ate the lot — they ate the bloody lot again!” He spits into the Bunnykins
bowl. “Go again on Thursday — you got to get there early.”

“I got the rest.” She waves at the eggs and spinach and broccoli and freesias
and daffodils.

“I don’t care about the rest. I want the fruit! Make sure you go again Thursday.”

“All right.” Mrs Filiberto is only too pleased to be told to go out again on Thursday.

“I got to have fruit! The nurse says I got to have fruit. The doctor says I got to
have fruit. Do you want me to get more sick?”

“What time’s the nurse coming today?” Monte has finished unloading the
groceries and is getting ready to leave. “I want to have a word to her. That leg
ulcer’s not getting any better.”

“She’ll just call Doctor. Last time he charged an arm and a leg. I’ll have no limbs
left by the time I’ve finished paying him ... I don’t need him — it’ll get better.”

“It’ll get better quicker if you quit smoking, Dad.”
"Get out!"

After lunch Mr Filiberto moves from the kitchen table to the living room sofa. Mrs Filiberto opens the windows farthest from him. (Direct draughts irritate Mr Filiberto.) She brings out the smallest table from the nest next to the fireplace and places it close — but not too close — to his right arm. Getting the position of this table right has been very trying. Mr Filiberto has bumped his arm on it many times. Once, a small laceration developed into an infected wound that took weeks to heal.

"Don't bump my arm," he warns, as Mrs Filiberto arranges his blanket and places the Bunnykins bowl on the table.

Mrs Filiberto retires to the kitchen to clear the lunch dishes. The Nurse arrives at the stroke of two. She greets them with a eucalyptus tissue on her nose. Mrs Filiberto wonders whether The Nurse finds the smell of their home repulsive. She wouldn’t blame her if she did. Most of the time it doesn’t bother her, but when she’s been out in the fresh air a while, the smell does get to her. That stench of stale tobacco. It hangs heavy, like old curtains. Mrs Filiberto often thinks that if Mr Filiberto gave up smoking, he would cease to be. Tobacco has impregnated every fibre of his clothing and seeped deep into every pore of his skin. From the tips of his yellowed fingers to the bottoms of his tar-clogged lungs to the pads of his fungi-ed crusty-nailed toes, Mr Filiberto is tobacco.

Mrs Filiberto watches The Nurse pick the dead tissue off the wound on Mr Filiberto’s lower left leg. It is still oozing pus. It has been very slow to heal despite daily dressings and twice-daily antibiotics. The Nurse has told Mrs Filiberto that Mr Filiberto has very poor circulation and that his blood sugar is too high. She has advised her to keep him off sweet foods, but he insists on three teaspoons of sugar in his coffees and jam and cream donuts for morning tea (courtesy of Monte, whose wife runs a small bakery.) Mrs Filiberto has tried explaining the situation to Monte, but Monte is of the view that “It’s his only fun — he’s ninety-one for God’s sake!” She has tried hiding the sugar and throwing the donuts in the bin but couldn’t cope with Mr Filiberto’s sugar-deprived rages. She lets him have his way now: a rotten leg is a small price to pay for peace.

Every day Mrs Filiberto listens to The Nurse give her advice: “Yes, you must have fresh fruit and juice and plenty of water. And you’ve got to stay off the sweet things, Mr Filiberto — and you really must cut right down on the smoking.” Every day, it’s the same, but today she adds, “I have to let the doctor know how you’re getting on. I’ll get him to drop by and see you soon.”

“I can’t pay him — ”
“Your leg’s not getting any better, Mr Filiberto. You might have to be admitted to hospital.”

A flicker of relief-followed-by-hope crosses Mrs Filiberto’s face. She pats her husband’s hand, the one not holding the cigarette. “If you have to go, you have to go,” she says quietly.

When The Doctor drops by around 5 o’clock, Mrs Filiberto is zipping Mr Filiberto’s suitcase in the living room. Monte, who has been told about his father’s imminent hospital admission, is already there and shouting. The Doctor is an impatient man. He strides in, ignores Monte, peels off the dressing, declares, “If we don’t do something about this now, you’ll lose this leg. You must go straight to hospital!” and strides out again. He doesn’t respond when Mr Filiberto shouts after him, “I didn’t ask you to come! I’m not paying!”

At the hospital, Mrs Filiberto utters not a single word. She sits patiently in the waiting room, oblivious to all that is going on around her. In her hands she holds a pair of knitting needles; in her lap, the beginnings of a red scarf. The stitches are knitting themselves: row after row, the clicking and looping dissemble Mrs Filiberto’s absence. She does not notice Monte usher Mr Filiberto outside every fifteen minutes for a cigarette. She does not notice the girl with the severed chin, the man on the trolley with an eye the size of a tennis ball, the woman charging in with a broken beer bottle after her husband’s lover. Mrs Filiberto is out. Not until Monte tells her it’s time to go home does she return.

It is late. Mr and Mrs Filiberto are back at home. The hospital didn’t have a bed for them. They waited two and a half hours before someone said, “Come back tomorrow, we’ll have a bed then.”

Mrs Filiberto is in bed. (She likes to tuck in early to keep warm. It is still cold at night and Mr Filiberto won’t have the gas on.) She is reading Gone With the Wind with gloves on — the fingerless kind. Mr Filiberto is walking up and down the yard and the driveway — up to the Volvo and back — as he does each night. She can hear him with his walking stick: up and down. Shuffle, shuffle, tap. Every now and then he shouts to her. “Front garden needs weeding!” “Bathroom light’s still on!” Up and down. He used to walk up and down Saint Cecilia Avenue in the evenings, checking out his houses, spying on his tenants under the cover of darkness. But one night a motorcyclist pulled into Number Twelve just as he was passing and knocked him over. He wasn’t hurt badly and the motorcyclist — a nice young man — did stop to help him to his feet, but after that Mr Filiberto never went beyond the wrought iron gates again.
Grace Yee, "The Liberation of The Lord's Wife"

Since then whenever something dreadful happens, Mr Filiberto blames it on The Motorcycle Accident. Once Mrs Filiberto found him asleep on a smouldering pillow. His cigarette had dropped out of his mouth and set it alight. When she tut-tutted about it: "What were you thinking?" Mr Filiberto said, "That bloody motorbike." Another time he was sitting outside and knocked the Bunnykins bowl onto the concrete path — hence the chip — and again it was the fault of "That bloody motorbike." Mrs Filiberto has told him not to dwell on these things, but he really can't help himself. Fuming is second nature to him.

Mrs Filiberto is thoroughly enjoying her book — she is up to the bit where Scarlett undertakes the perilous journey home to Tara with Melanie and the newborn baby — but she is finding it more and more difficult to concentrate. A string of words is growing slowly in her mind, outward in a clockwise circle, winding around itself like the shell of a snail. At the centre of the circle glow nine words, tightly knotted together: things-to-do-when-Mr-Filiberto-is-in-hospital. The string is gathering momentum as it grows faster and longer and bigger until Mrs Filiberto's brain can no longer contain it. The words seep from her eyes and superimpose themselves on the sentences in her book. Her temples throb and the space around her head begins to crackle — the static makes her hair stand on end. The entire bedroom fills with writhing iridescent word serpents.

The air is thick with things-to-do.

The windows steam up. The room becomes warm, then hot.

There is drumming on the roof. Muttering about hospitals and fruit, motorbikes and no-limbs-left. The muttering fades, the drumming gets louder, the room becomes hotter. Mrs Filiberto throws off her fingerless gloves, her shawl and her eye-glasses. She floats toward the ceiling completely oblivious to the shout and thud outside, followed by a clattering like wooden sticks falling on concrete.