As Sri Devi and Jack find their seats in the cinema, the lights go down and in comes a couple who sit the other side of Jack. Sri Devi doesn’t see the man until later because he’s sitting on the farther side of the pair, but the woman is noticeable. She must be feeling cool because after a minute or two she picks up from near her feet a black leather jacket that she’s placed on top of her bag. She unfolds the jacket and puts it on. About twenty minutes later, once the main feature has started, Sri Devi watches the woman put her right foot, her foot closest to Jack, up on the back of the seat in front of her. The foot is bare, with red painted toenails showing starkly as a contrast against her pale skin, in the faint light thrown off the cinema screen.

The foot comes and goes from Sri Devi’s view as the film, a political comedy, picks up pace. Sri Devi has her arm snuggled along Jack’s underarm and midriff, as is usual for them at the cinema … until some dramatic point in a film when she often snatches back her arm into the psychological safety of her own body’s heat.

About halfway through the film Jack slowly moves his right leg to cross over his left, balancing his knee near Sri Devi’s thigh and extending his left sock-covered foot so that it’s a smidgen away from the woman’s bare foot. Sock-covered? Since when does Jack take off his shoes in public – or even at home for that matter? When he’s going to bed, is all, Sri Devi thinks.

So there they are, those two odd feet: one clothed in a sock, a male white sports sock with a red cap covering the toes; the other a bare white-skinned female set of toes, displaying a red cap of nail varnish. Both distracting in contrasting red and white, viewed from within the darkness of the low shifting light of the big screen.

Sri Devi knows this surge of feeling within her so well. Some long-forgotten spasm of fear that another woman’s sexuality has caught the attention of her lover. A dormant feeling sprung into primitive life again, that familiar vice of jealousy searing her senses.

How many times has a similar scenario played out between them over the ten years they’ve been living together? Sri Devi knows she should have adapted to Australian society by now – recognised and accepted the dominance of men, their tough emotional distancing when matters of commitment and loyalty are raised, their individualism, their male mateship – but her South Indian background serves little use in these harsh emotional circumstances. She only has herself to blame, she thinks, being so blinded by her attachment to Jack, smitten by the enthralling quality of his cavalier behavior and his exotic culture. He was her first and only lover after she left her family and home culture to study in Sydney. In going her own way, believing she was an independent person in a new age of opportunity, her experience of the support of her powerful mother, matriarch of an extended family back home, had proven so little use to her now.

Sri Devi consciously tries to clear her head as she feels the blood in her veins rush with heat. What to do? Will she sit out the movie, distracted by thoughts of footsie, by imaginings of the thrill of an electric arc between bare bony flesh and cotton polyester garment? She tries to play with words such as ‘podiatric poaching’

and ‘toe-ing and fro-ing’ to distract her passion, with visions of rising instep under fallen arches. Now she grasps at her thoughts, which are attempting to make a calculation of the fraction of space that separates the clothed from the naked.

To take stock of her mind Sri Devi takes stock of the sock. Leaning across Jack’s chest, she swiftly grabs his toes, holding them firmly.

‘Why aren’t you wearing shoes?’ she asks in a level voice. The woman’s naked foot whips back into darkness, recoiling with speed as if from snakebite.

‘What?’ Jack hisses as he glares at Sri Devi, his leg suspended horizontally. Still leaning across him, ‘It’s just that I wondered why your foot and this woman’s …’ she whispers, maintaining a monotone.

Jack turns to face Sri Devi, who momentarily touches his chest and feels its pounding to match her own, as the other woman slinks down in her seat, hidden now behind Jack’s rage, and the man leans over the woman to find out what is going on in the dark.

A dense black fog hits Sri Devi’s chest and her mind simultaneously, as if bursting from Jack’s body in a shock wave. An ugly overpowering black fog, it penetrates Sri Devi’s rib cage in a flash, invades her heart as poison, seeping through to its centre, then sweeping along the veins of her chest and arms, pumped through her body as adrenalin, even surging into her thighs and calves. Then, in an instant, her overheated blood has turned to ice.

‘What are you saying?’ Jack’s voice rasps.

‘I just wondered what was happening,’ Sri Devi croaks, her head, her thoughts, her weakened voice barely clear above the frenzy inside her, now turned frozen and fractured, a weight in her lower body.

‘Nothing’s happening.’

Jack and Sri Devi stare at the screen while she struggles to concentrate on its large and noisy characters. After a few minutes she tucks her arm back along Jack’s, surprised that it’s accepted. She’s decided to make light of the episode and use Jack’s raging body heat to recharge her own body temperature, through a façade of ‘making up’.

Over an hour later, as the credits roll, Jack directs Sri Devi outside with a curt, ‘Shall we go?’ He indicates the direction of the exit further along the row, turning his back on the couple. He’s steering her away from any unseemly incident, she realises. No time to savour the film and check the names of director of cinematography and best boy, as the lights come up.

Outside on the footpath a torrent of words gushes from Jack’s mouth. ‘Oh no, my girl, you won’t be able to pass this one off, not this time. Let me tell you, I feel absolutely fucking furious about what happened in there. What the hell were you doing? What in God’s name were you on about, making accusations about me in the middle of a movie?’

‘I would have been happy to discuss it then and there, Jack, but what’s the point now? It’s over.’

‘Okay, so I’m used to scenes in public where you seem to have absolutely no regard for anyone else and just start screaming about whatever delusions you have at the time. But there was no way I could deal with it then. The woman’s husband must have thought you were stark raving mad. What’s this mad woman on about, he must
have thought?’

This is the first time Sri Devi has had the thought that Jack might have been scared that the man could react violently and make a physical assault on him, there in the cinema. This possibility hadn’t entered her thoughts, until Jack now points it out. Clearly a very male reaction, and part of the male psyche, she sees. She had been oblivious, she now knows, and this realisation causes a little crack in the walls of her ego, to think that she could have underestimated someone who seemed to have a minor role in a situation and overlooked his possible reactions. Not that that would have stopped her, anyway. But she won’t let the walls protecting her ego burst now … won’t allow herself to indulge the floodwaters of her emotional self and be pushed to launch a detailed accusation, to be intimidated into creating a dramatic scene with an uncertain result, especially not here in the street, where there is no evidence of any wrongdoing, when some of the main characters are dispersed and all is now in the realm of the memory.

‘It was hardly a scene, Jack. I just wondered why you had your shoe off.’

‘What sort of accusation is that? I mean what did you think was going on?’

‘It’s not an accusation. It was a question. But it’s over anyway – and we can’t relive it now.’

They’re already at their car, parked very close to the cinema entrance tonight. Sri Devi takes out her keys. She has to drive, as Jack had a bit to drink earlier in the evening. Into the front of the car from opposite doors, they move in rhythm. Now, silence.

She turns the steering wheel, and accelerates as she swings the car out into heavy traffic.

‘You’re driving like a mad thing. Watch these people – you’ll hit someone,’ Jack directs Sri Devi, as if he’s in control of both of their lives and fateful actions.

A policeman on a large brown horse, looming above Sri Devi’s soft-top sports car, is attempting to control the stragglers from a crowd emerging from a nearby football stadium as they dart across in front of the traffic.

‘It’s dangerous here,’ Sri Devi thinks, as she cuts back her speed and decides this is no time to inflame Jack further by rejecting his overbearing driving advice fired at her inches from her face.

Silence returns and lasts all the way home.

Now in the kitchen, Jack is whistling and fondling the cat as he tries to project a feigned invincibility … as a prelude to a second blast. ‘I want to say again that I’m very angry about what happened tonight. I’ve been falsely accused many times in my life and in this case the accusation is laughable … just preposterous. And I want an apology.’

‘What accusation? There’s no accusation,’ Sri Devi tries to cut in.

‘Let me finish. I haven’t said even one tenth of what I mean to say, whether you like it or not.’

Before the raving gets under way in full voice, Sri Devi pipes up that she’s got something to say too, once he’s finished.

And so Jack’s ranting takes over: about Sri Devi’s insane jealousy; about his innocence in flirting; about her exhibitionism in public; about her complete disregard for other people’s feelings.

‘A Footnote on Footlights.’ Christine Williams.

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When he’s finished Sri Devi says that she’s sorry that he’s so angry. No, that’s not enough, he says. He wants the accusation withdrawn. But there’s no accusation, so how can it be withdrawn?

‘It wasn’t dealt with at the time so any attempt to bully me now we’re at home on our own is not really going to change that,’ is the stroke of brilliance Sri Devi puts forward as her next gambit.

A faint expression of self-doubt flits across Jack’s eyes and forehead. Bullying: now that’s a new word in the jaded vocabulary of their verbal wars. Shaky ground for him, perhaps? Sri Devi can see he wants to think about her interpretation some more, in the hope of refuting it later.

‘What do you think? That I was trying to seduce that woman by rubbing her foot with mine? I’m not such a fool.’

‘I’m not saying you consciously set out to seduce her. Perhaps it was an unconscious response to her.’

‘Oh, so this is the great ‘cover-all-situations’ claim now, is it? Unconscious. And if I was acting unconsciously, don’t you think I would have quietly touched her higher up her leg, groped her thigh in the dark, maybe, as it rested in the seat beside me? You wouldn’t have seen any of it. I’m not so stupid that I would have touched her foot stuck out there in the open, where you and her bloke could have seen it all, am I? Am I that stupid?’

Well, no, he’s not stupid, but IQ is not a major factor in the workings of the unconscious, nor of the male sex drive, particularly after a few beers. Sri Devi thinks this but dares not say it, out of fear of further provocation. She’s alarmed that the hypothetical scenario has taken an unexpected turn with visions of even more groping in the dark than she had imagined.

‘And I think I deserve … at the very least if you won’t withdraw the accusation … that you say you’re sorry. Sorry for the public mess that you and your insane jealousy and wild imagination create, over and over again. It’s just another typical example of your madness and self-centredness and I’m supposed to put up with it, am I? Well, I want an apology.’

‘I’ve said I’m sorry you’re so upset, and that I’ve caused it. What more can I say?’

There’s quiet. Not a full deadly silence but a quiet after the storm. A stand-off. Sri Devi won’t say a word in case she disturbs this peaceful interlude, which may lead on to a sweet and settled calm. She hopes just such a gentle quietude will follow, as it has on other nights, if the battle lines can be ignored long enough for a truce to emerge within the bounds of domesticity. Sri Devi is thankful that she has had to give so little ground.

She moves her arm slowly towards the refrigerator door, opens it, and takes out a soft-drink. She reaches out for a glass and pours Jack a drink, a routine for him before bed. He turns away, heading for the bedroom in the hope, she thinks, that he’ll soon find release from his rage in peaceful sleep.

Sri Devi is tired. So tired. She checks the medicine cabinet and finds a small bottle. Lethal. In one swift movement she pours a few drops into Jack’s drink then takes a gulp herself, before carrying the glass through to their bedroom.

As the couple lie down to rest side by side – on their backs instead of their usual singly-entwined, twinned-foetal, spooning position – they each wait for sleep to
restore their own and the other's harmony. Clean knocked out. Not a word spoken. What’s there to say, and how many more times could she possibly suffer the playing out of such a pathetic drama, Sri Devi thinks?

She can only hope that sometime during the night their souls may reconnect and lie in unison, as their bare feet petrify into cold alabaster by sunrise. Then Devi Durga Shakti, the all-knowing all-powerful warrior goddess, may swoop down upon them, clutch them in any number of her eighteen arms, and career away with them beyond the darkness, so that together they may merge into an infinity of space and light.