Internationally renowned painter Bhupen Khakhar was born in 1934. He is also a gifted writer of Gujarati fiction and drama. One of the few Indian celebrities to have spoken openly to the press about his homosexuality and the homoerotic themes in his work, he explains how when he was younger he kept his homosexuality a secret from friends and family: “I was very much ashamed of my sexuality. . . . Up to 1975 I felt that if my friends knew I am gay, I was prepared to commit suicide. . . . After my visit to England in 1979, I saw that homosexuality was accepted.” His increasingly stable attachment to his friend Vallavbhai also encouraged him to speak openly, and the death of his mother in 1980, itself a severe blow, allowed him a new freedom of public action. The untitled story translated here was first published in Kriti magazine in April 1968 and is typical in its understated depiction of a lower-middle-class man’s ease with his bisexuality, double life, and liaison with a peon. It is remarkable too for its exposure of how alternative familial arrangements are often masked as conventional ones.

Ratilal liked to have his picture taken. He also liked to wear white clothes. So when Manjari asked him to go with her to get their picture taken, he got ready. Ratilal and Manjari stood close to each other. Ratilal’s hair had thinned slightly in front and the hair near his ear was gray. They had fallen in love when they were very young, but both were

1. Timothy Hyman, Bhupen Khakhar (Bombay: Chemould, 1998), 68.
still mad about each other. He bought a jasmine garland for Manjari’s hair and then they both went to the studio. They stood straight, clutching each other. There was no space even for a lotus leaf between them.

Mohanlal was Manjari’s husband.  
Mohanlal was very regular in his habits.  
Every morning he would reach the office on time.  
His work routine there too was fixed.  
He would wear black clothes to go to office and would reach the machine at ten past eight.

He would greet Shyamlal who sat next to him and would begin his work.  
Tea at nine thirty.  
Mohanlal was expert at working overtime.  
When he arranged to work overtime, Manjari never failed to make millet rotis for him.  
Mohanlal and Manjari’s married life was happy. They had two children.  
Now Mohanlal had had a vasectomy. So there was nothing to worry about. Ratilal often used to stay at their home. Manjari and Ratilal were old friends. Mohanlal was reserved—he would talk to Manjari only when necessary.

Manjari’s fondness for watching Hindi films was taken care of by Ratilal. Mohanlal only saw religious films. He was uninterested in other new films. But Manjari knew all the film songs by heart. Very often, during Mohanlal’s absence, in the afternoon, she would sing them to Ratilal. When both were lying in bed she would take Ratilal’s head on her lap or sometimes cover Ratilal’s face with her loose hair and sing love songs. When Mohanlal once saw them like this he was very amused, but he was certain that their relationship was like that of brother and sister and since both were happy, the incident slipped his mind.

He even saw the picture of her and Ratilal in her purse. In the picture, Ratilal’s jaw jutted out. Ratilal was fair and taller than Mohanlal. Mohanlal’s hair had grayed. His lower lip hung down and his face was wrinkled.

Mohanlal had to go out of town on office work. The atmosphere was pleasant at Nani Jithardi when he reached there at seven in the morning. Because it had rained the previous day, some areas were waterlogged. But Mohanlal was very familiar with the roads of Nani Jithardi. He knew the peon who worked at Desai Steel Industries. It was with him that he had tasted liquor for the first time in his life. It tasted like poison. He never touched it again.

Mohanlal was very particular about his work.

The machine had conked out. He had repaired many such machines. He started work at seven thirty sharp. He had tea at nine thirty. Again he went back to work. He started thinking as he worked.

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2. Rati is the name of the god of love’s wife, and connotes eros. Mohan, lit. the charming one, is one of the names of Shri Krishna.