



CECIL GREESON PUTT

OR THE NIGHT WATCH

by Constance McCutcheon

Cecil Greeson Putt got ready for bed early and climbed into it with a sigh. After a great deal of fussing with the bedclothes, he rose, went into the bathroom, turned on the light, blinked in its sudden brightness, tried to urinate, produced a few drops, turned off the light, groped to the kitchen area, got himself a glass of water, returned to bed, placed the water on his bed table, wriggled back into bed, sighed, and closed his eyes. After a few moments, the sound of swishing sheets disturbed the silence. Wrenching himself halfway out of bed, he reached down to grasp the alarm lever of his clock radio set on the floor by the bed and snapped it down two notches. A string of notes sounded—the *on* setting for the radio, which meant he had had the alarm correctly set to *wake to radio/ alarm* before. He switched the lever back up to where it had been, fingered it reluctantly, then writhed back up into bed. A moment later, he twisted himself out again, snaked down to take hold of the clock radio, and held its luminous clock face close to his worried one. The alarm was set for five a.m. That was right. He set the clock radio back down on the cold linoleum floor and wriggled up into bed. Within seconds, the sheets swished, he rose, poised on an elbow, and reached up to the tall, three-way table lamp, a lopsided affair with a dusty bamboo shade. He turned the lamp switch

once. The light did not go on. That was bad. He had indeed left it on the wrong channel again. The highest of the bulb's three settings had burned out a long time ago. Left on that channel, it could cause a fire. To make sure the lamp was really off, he switched it through all its settings, the first and second which worked and which glare blinded him, to the next setting—the highest setting which didn't work—upon which the bulb went out, and from there to the real off setting. To be sure, he switched the lamp through all its settings again—two on, two off—one more time. The second off was really off and now the lamp was really off, too. He could be sure of that now. He would not be burned alive in bed. He turned over to go to sleep. Simultaneous with the emission of a heavy sigh, his hand reached out and his body writhed down to check the alarm mode switch of his clock radio. He clicked it down two positions, heard the string of notes—radio *on*—then clicked it up two to where it had been correctly set: *wake to alarm/radio*. Lunging down, he lifted it and studied the luminous clock face. The alarm was set for five a.m. That was correct. After a moment's thought, he reached across for his water glass and peered down into it. Mournfully, he lumbered up and out of bed, set the glass down in the kitchen area on his way into the bathroom, turned on the light which blinded him, tried to urinate, produced a few drops, turned off the light, shuffled in the dark back to the kitchen area and up to the sink to get himself a fresh glass of special water purchased at the Millie Stone Mills health food store in special safety plastic gallon jugs. He always kept a jug on the fluted ceramic drainage counter of his kitchen sink. Loathe to pour the expensive yet no longer fresh water down the drain, he tilted the glass to his lips and gulped it down, filled the emptied glass with fresh water, padded on chilled feet back to bed, set the glass on the bedside table and with an enthusiastic leap, snuggled back into the cooled sheets, a tiny pang of anxiety alerting him to the fact that it was no longer so early. After a moment, his arm snaked down. He felt for the clock radio alarm mode lever, clicked it down two positions, heard the radio notes, then back up two to *wake to radio/alarm*. With a grunt, he leaned down, grabbed the clock and studied the alarm setting on the clock's luminous face while trying to avoid looking at the time. It was set for five a.m., which was correct. Reaching up, he turned the lamp switch once to see if it was on the wrong channel. The bulb blazed on hurting his eyes, proving that it had, in fact, really been off. He ran it through all the channels—two on, two off—twice to make sure, then turned over to go to sleep. After a heavy-hearted struggle, he sat up in bed, pulled his water glass over, breathed down into it, got unhappily to his feet, traipsed into the

bathroom, emerged to shuffle to the kitchen counter where he stared down at the old water, tilted the glass to his lips, drank the glass dry in a few gulps, then filled it with new water. At his bedside, he placed the glass on the bedside table, worked his way down between the bedclothes, clicked the clock radio's alarm lever down two and up two notches, grabbed the clock to study the alarm setting, reached up and turned the light on twice, off twice, then peered down into his water glass. In utter disgust, he rose to go into the bathroom before getting fresh water.

At the kitchen counter, he cursed himself. He had been shopping that afternoon, but had been too picky about the extra cost and weight to get another jug of water. He had known he would need it. And now he had no more. He returned to bed without his glass, checked the clock radio's alarm lever, studied the alarm setting, turned the lamp on twice, off twice, and was just reaching up for his water glass when his arm snapped back to his chest. He rolled violently towards the wall, pressed his forehead hard against the cheap paneling, and lay taut as a mummy waiting for dawn.

