

# The Laughing Grave

*by* strannikov

In the dim low-ceilinged cavern Tod sits atop a mound of dirt in his rumpled suit, rubbing his shins and staring just past his feet before shaking his head. He squints, then shakes his head again in tired defeat.

Nearby, or somewhere close in the hovering dark, slow shovels spaded the earth, then came the rumble of a backhoe, soon followed by the plops of a few handfuls of dirt tossed upon a mostly hollow container.

Tod sat oblivious, and to demonstrate his aloofness, he began performing calculations with his fingers, just as the backhoe roared back to life, followed by the flattening of earth with the backsides of spade and shovel. He continued shaking his head and attempting to count in the pause that followed the backhoe and the shovels and which preceded someone's long urination.

A crash of cracking, splintering wood followed, and with a dull thud and low groans Newhouse dropped from the dark in his fresh suit.

"Unnnnhhhhh," Newhouse moaned. Tod continued with his calculations showing no awareness of Newhouse's arrival nearby.

"Ohhhhhhhhh!" Newhouse groaned with a bit more feeling, Tod gritted his teeth and abandoned his calculations.

"Unnnnhhhhh, godddddd . . ." Newhouse continued. Tod looked over then stood, hunched over uncomfortably against the dark low overhang, knees popping and grating and creaking as he stepped over to examine Newhouse writhing in his pile of fouled dirt and splintered wood.

"Hmmm?" Tod inquired.

Newhouse could only bob his head up and down, eyes closed, then he rolled his head from side to side until he got it to pop. Only after this did he open his eyes, breathing now as if he'd just finished running two or three miles.

"What . . . what is this?" he huffed.

Tod was possessed of only a bit more energy. "It's what it looks like."

Newhouse froze, squinting as he recalled his immediate past.

"I'm dead!" he bleated.

Tod was not favorably impressed. "'I'm dead!', he says. So what does that make me?"

Newhouse dropped his head back into the dirt.

"You—you're dead, too!"

"No, I'm the gravedigger come down to pester you about the 401k plan and the IRA you left behind. My poor children are starving because of bastards like you, and you have no more need of them, so if you'll please sign here . . ."

Newhouse was startled enough by this news to raise himself on his arms. "But you're dead!"

Tod cast a mean squint in Newhouse's specific direction. "University graduate, for sure."

"We're . . . dead!"

"That we are, and this is The Grave."

Newhouse tried to raise himself but collapsed from the effort. "Nnnngghhhhh . . . I feel like lead!"

"Rigor mortis or embalming fluid now, gravity later . . . either way, you get over it."

At long last, Newhouse performed an overdue doubletake: "We're dead! What are we doing talking?"

Tod sighed before speaking, glancing left and right as he spoke. "We keep going and going. Some kind of 'quasi-physical momentum'. We persist, in attenuated form. Don't let your preconceptions ruin it for you, though."

Newhouse attempted to peer into the prevailing darkness. "Well, so . . . this is it?"

Tod turned to pace off a short distance, then returned to his spot. "This is where you start, anyway. Bodiless existence takes a while to set in."

"So how long does this last?"

“Years, six or eight, sometimes almost ten. About a year for every decade spent up there. We . . . evaporate—body, mind, soul, heart . . .” Tod cocked his head as if to listen, “. . . finally, even the voice.”

Newhouse paused. “‘Finally’? What d’you mean, ‘finally’?”

“You hear or you don’t, depending on how your hearing holds out. Here, get up . . . and don’t pull so hard!” Tod’s arm popped in its socket as Newhouse rose, brushing some of the dirt from his suit.

With no trace of irony, Newhouse confessed again: “Ohhh goddddd, I feel like I’m dead!”

Tod eyed him severely.

“Ohh, right . . .”

Tod took steps backward into the darkness as he disappeared: “You should be thrilled to be here now—they’ve been making improvements!”

Newhouse stood swaying, trying to peer after Tod as he retreated into the dark. His arc only widening, Newhouse soon plopped again into the pile of dirt and rubbish he arrived in. Moments later, a few drops fell from the dark, landing on him without response. Another few drops fell, which he caught in an open palm. A light trickle followed, which splattered into his face this time as he glanced upward. Newhouse returned his gaze to his wet palm, which he lifted to his nose with suspicion, sniffed again and again, then struggled to move out from under the growing stream.

