

THE ART OF AUTOPSY

by Bruce Jay Friedman

Its prime exponent is Thomas T. Noguchi, coroner to the stars (Janis Joplin, Sharon Tate, Marilyn Monroe, Bobby Kennedy . . .)

Despite the freakish side of California and an occasional Tate-style aberration, death still seems an anachronism on the West Coast, a particular insult to the sun, the orange juice and the sweet and lazy pace of life along the Pacific. The seasons shift so imperceptibly, time passes with such subtlety, that people on the West Coast are shocked to find themselves old and thoroughly embarrassed to learn they are dying. Yet Californians, golden-haired, bronzed, spilling over with health, do die like other people, sixty-five thousand slipping off each year in Los Angeles County alone. Of this group, twenty thousand or so expire under something of a cloud, thereby coming to the attention of the coroner's office*, which sifts through them, turning back some seven thousand and agreeing to investigate the others. If the bodies are discovered within a ten-mile radius of downtown Los Angeles, they are taken to the morgue at the Hall of Justice. Beyond that zone, they are seen to by one of the outlying morgues in a rotating—are you ready for this—"Morgue of the Month" plan.

Each year, the county in question being Los Angeles, there are at least a handful of cases it is difficult to avoid categorizing as juicy. Because of their bizarre nature, the celebrity of the deceased and the potential for a foul-up before a global audience—in these blue-ribbon cases it is generally the head coroner himself who seizes the reins. Thelma Todd, Carole Landis, Maria Montez, William Desmond Taylor—the Los Angeles morgue has turned up some winners. Since 1967, in a weird piece of casting, Hollywood's "Celebrity Coroner" has been a brilliant, bouncy, fun-loving Japanese-American named Thomas T. (Tsunetomi) Noguchi, whose grisly but imposing "credits" include autopsies on Inger Stevens, Janis Joplin, Sharon Tate and Bobby Kennedy ("one of the most brilliant of all time," according to fellow pathologists). Brilliance, autopsy-wise, does not refer to superb craftsmanship with the surgical knife so much as skill at management and organization. There had been worldwide criticism of the John Kennedy autopsy, the renowned Dr. William Eckert of Kansas coming away with the view that it represented "a black eye for forensic medicine." Both the late Senator's family and the Los Angeles coroner's department were anxious to avoid the Dallas confusion and to have the Bobby Kennedy autopsy come off without a hitch. A veteran of eight thousand per-

sonally administered autopsies (tack on, if you like, another five thousand or so reviews of other people's work), Noguchi was nevertheless put to the test by the late Senator Kennedy. He does not exactly sail into an autopsy with a song on his lips, but by the same token he has trained himself to be unemotional and to see a corpse not as a person but as the "physical evidence of someone's existence." He feels that "It would not do for a coroner to break down and weep bitterly over each case." Still, for all of his objectivity, the doctor has limits, making it a practice to avoid doing friends or relatives. Not exactly a mover among the Hollywood film colony, Noguchi nevertheless does know Ernest Borgnine and Donald O'Connor casually, and it is assumed that if either of their numbers came up, he would fob the work off on assistants. In the case of Senator Kennedy, Noguchi's feelings were deep and personal and he would have been only too glad to pass the work on to a subordinate. "But there was no way," says the Los Angeles coroner. "For fifteen minutes, at the scene, I was stunned. Fortunately, there were so many people at work. What I did to fend off shock was to compile data. Mr. So-and-So, ask Dr. So-and-So to do so-and-so. In our work, for technical reasons, we cover the face of the deceased. I was so happy about that. I did not want to be alone with Senator Kennedy."

As to the others in his star-studded file, Janis Joplin was just another day's work to the coroner, her "Big Brother and the Holding Company" style light-years away from the "boogie-woogie" that so charmed Noguchi as a boy in Yokosuka and which his Chopin-minded mother declared out-of-bounds because of its "sexy connotation." At the time of the Joplin O.D., Noguchi's thoughts happened to be on Judy Garland, "because I loved *A Star Is Born*," and he consulted with the London coroner who supervised the Garland autopsy. "I did not do Dorothy Dandridge," he points out with some modesty, but as an assistant coroner in 1962 he was called to investigate the death by suspected suicide of a girl named Marilyn Monroe. "How odd," the deputy coroner thought to himself, "that this girl should have the same name as the famed international film star." As to the Tate case, Noguchi, who calmly ticked off precise descriptions to a jury of Voityck Frykowski's fifty-one stab wounds, Sharon Tate's sixteen, and Abigail Folger's twenty-eight, calls it the most bizarre in his experience, but will add nothing more.

As a boy in Japan, Noguchi recalls a penchant for "benign mischief," one which took the form of chalking up teachers' trousers, seeing to it that their

desk drawers would not open and rigging up red bulbs that popped on when he felt they were passing on ridiculous information. He owns up to being put in closets a lot, as a punishment. Another of his rascalities was the setting of booby traps for the postman, Noguchi himself falling into the first one and almost shearing off his chin. "I vowed," the coroner says, a bit ominously, and not in the least worried about sounding like a menacing Oriental, "that I would never fall into my own booby trap again." The mischief-making style continued on through his teens and when Japan went under in 1945, his comment was, "Oh, well, win some, lose some." In 1952 he went to California to practice medicine in the winner's camp. To keep their sanity in a joyless profession, American coroners are known to practice among themselves a grisly form of graveside humor, referring jocularly to corpses as "stiffs" and to "floaters" (bodies taken from the water) as "job security," since ordinary doctors prefer to avoid working on them at any cost. The japing coroner is to be taken as seriously as the newspaperman on a sluggish day who wishes for a good rape or a nice healthy industrial fire. Dr. Noguchi, the Yokosuka prankster, who refers to his work as "horizontal medicine," had a style that was tailor-made for the American coroners' laugh academy. A few years ago, Dr. Noguchi was dismissed from his post and became the center of a wild and hair-raising investigation before the Los Angeles County Civil Service Commission. It was a case that left Noguchi penniless, firmed up the spine of the Japanese community in L.A., and eventually sent the coroner back to his old post, clean as a whistle and with full back pay. It also turned up some hints of a vendetta against the doctor by the medical schools that didn't want him hired in the first place. But somewhere in the picture was an echo of those benign graveside chuckles, badly misunderstood this time and perhaps shoving the boy from Yokosuka back into one of his own booby traps with near-fatal results.

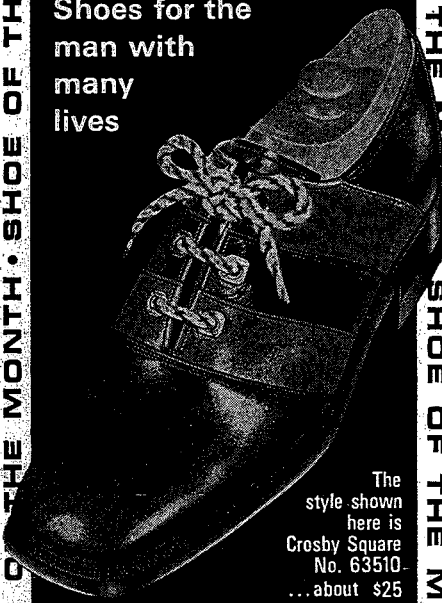
At first it appeared Noguchi would not fight his dismissal; the charges by powerful L. S. Hollinger, the county's administrative chief, seemed so massive, so thunderous, so outrageous and all-encompassing that no man could possibly survive the onslaught. Like a good West Coast Oriental, Dr. Noguchi was expected to cower in shame and silence and meekly slip away, not unlike the 100,000 World War II American-Japanese who timidly allowed themselves to be trundled off to intern camps after Pearl Harbor. But someone had failed to count on a certain "heavy" lady, to use the current parlance, who

* The coroner would tend to come in on suicides, homicides, deaths from scuba-diving, abortions, industrial accidents, traffic deaths, ones in which the deceased had not been seen by a doctor within ten days of expiring—in short, "any death by trauma."

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1) teaches immunology-serology and electron microscopy at California State College, 2) had been yanked out of U.C.L.A. in 1942 and tossed into one of those wartime intern camps, 3) was now Mrs. Tom Noguchi and 4) was not about to do a repeat shuffle off to Amachi Detention Center. Though it was considered very "un-Japanese" of them, the Noguchis prepared to do battle with City Hall. At first, many in the usually timid Japanese community had winced at the charges, especially the ones proposing that Noguchi was off his rocker, mental illness carrying a special stigma to it in Asia; they hated him for even being accused of it. But as the hearings moved along, and the county's case began to smack of a World War II fear campaign—the power-crazed Oriental smiling over a sea of corpses—the local Japanese began to rally round and finally to support Noguchi to the hilt with a defense fund called J.U.S.T. (Japanese United in Search for Truth). It's a lucky thing someone was backing him to the hilt because the charges began to come at the little coroner like a missile attack, most of them so "weird" that in the view of Noguchi's defense counsel, Godfrey Isaac, "their very publication must destroy the reputation of a human being." As the hearing got under way, the impression began to form that somehow a Japanese combination of Don Rickles, Bela Lugosi and Peter Boyle* had slipped into the saddle and been running things at the Los Angeles morgue. One of the first up at bat was Deputy County Counsel Martin Weekes who said that Noguchi, while waiting for Senator Robert F. Kennedy to die, had gone into a little dance in his office, saying, "I'm going to be famous . . . I hope he dies . . . because if he dies then my international reputation will be established." A bit later, after the second of two helicopters had gone down in flames, with heavy loss of life, Noguchi, according to Weekes, did another "dance in the flames" . . . "a reincarnation of Dante's *Inferno*," chanting, "Isn't it nice . . . Isn't it nice" as he jigged about the morgue. When two giant airliners went down in the sea off International Airport, more and more bodies stacking up at the coroner's office, Noguchi, in Weekes's view, remained unsatisfied, having somehow fixed the magic number of "14,000" deaths he wanted to have processed from the time he became coroner in December of 1967. "As sickness ravaged," Weekes said Noguchi announced to associates: "I hope we have another crash . . . I pray, I pray that there is another air crash. . . ." Noguchi then allegedly described a pet vision of his, ". . . that a 747 loaded to capacity crashed into a hotel. And amid the flames, I, Thomas Noguchi, stood, and the press was there. . . ." Pouring additional spice on the "death dance" accusation, Weekes portrayed the little coroner as a brutal warlord of a boss, promising, in the case of a black chauffeur-bodyguard, Lewis Sawyer, to work the fellow "until he dropped."

* Joe, in the film Joe.

"And drop he did," said Weekes, revealing with some drama that Sawyer's funeral was being held the following Monday "on the other side of town," the head coroner having kept him 486 hours overtime in 1968 alone. With a certain charity, Weekes gave Noguchi credit for being a "complex collage" and said that "there is a little bit of Thomas Noguchi in each of us."

After corroborating the charge that her husband had been worked to death, Mrs. Frances Sawyer tossed in the fact that Noguchi once called her departed spouse "a black bastard" and threw a pair of shoes at him.

A senior coroner's investigator named Edward G. Day weighed in with the information that at the height of the influenza epidemic in Los Angeles, Noguchi had peered into his busy, overcrowded autopsy room and positively beamed with "joy." With autopsies being performed on all four tables in the room, other bodies, awaiting examination, stacked two deep on gurneys, and the embalming section thrown into action to accommodate the overflow, Noguchi had tiptoed up to Day and said, "You like it?"

Twice before, during great tragedies, such as the Kennedy assassination and the shuttle-helicopter crash, the keen-eyed Day claimed to have spotted the head coroner with a "look of elation" on his face or a "slight smile."

"This did not," in Day's view, "seem to be appropriate for the situations involved."

If the various coroners' aides had had a field day during the hearing at Dr. Noguchi's expense, some of his secretaries went at him as if he were a "fresh one" who'd just been carted into the morgue. After describing Noguchi's puzzling manner of referring to Orientals as "yellow submarines," ex-secretary Miss Eleanor Schmidt said that he had once pulled a knife from a sheath on his belt, slashed a sheet of scrap paper in half and said, "It could be used for an autopsy on the living—and perhaps to perform an autopsy on Mr. Hollinger." Piling on additional secretarial wrath, Mrs. Ethel Field, a Japanese-American like Noguchi, said the doctor once told her "he hated all niggers, he hated all Jews and he hated all Japs," the last striking her as ironic since no one in the coroner's office was more Japanese than Noguchi himself. Pressing on, Mrs. Field said that whenever Noguchi addressed a public group, she was instructed to have a mobile-phone company activate a radio "beeper" device he carried on his belt during the talk. He wanted this done, Mrs. Field pointed out, so that he could say he was "wanted back at the office" and so he could "make himself look important." In addition, the coroner often swore in her presence, saying such things as "Goddamn it," "Sonofabitch," and "Go to hell," all of which she found "shocking." To top it off, Mrs. Field said he once vowed he was going to get certain people in the coroner's office, particularly L. S. Hollinger and some of the people at the U.S.C. School of Medicine. Brandishing a scalpel, he said that if he had to go

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down, he'd take certain people with him, adding, "Mrs. Field, if I die, you'll die with me. . . ."

Dr. Noguchi's alleged wild pill-taking also figured in the hearing. Herbert McRoy, chief administrative deputy, testified he saw the coroner pop a few. He also saw him jump up from his desk, run across the room, slap a wall map and cry, "This is my jurisdiction." Dr. Russell Henry, acting coroner during the hearing, lectured the group about the effects of an overdose of Dexamyl, saying it led to "a feeling of euphoria (Cloud Nine), a feeling of omnipotence, nervousness and irritability, difficulty in sleeping, a disconnected outpouring of ideas, a paranoid fear for personal safety and a hostility for other people."

"Did you observe these in any person in the coroner's office," he was asked by the Deputy Counsel.

"Yes."

"Who was that person?"

"I regret to say, Dr. Noguchi."

The head of the coroner's toxicological division, India-born Dr. Ramesh Gupta, was deeply disturbed when Dr. Noguchi told him, "If you are not happy over here you can go back to India. . . . And never trust an American." Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, in an examination by Noguchi's defense counsel, on the subject of Hollinger's responsibility, said that Hollinger was so physically afraid of Noguchi he kept "an armed deputy sheriff" in the office while talking to the coroner; but perhaps the cruelest cut of all was an allegation that Noguchi had mucked up the Bobby Kennedy autopsy. "During the [Senator's] autopsy," Martin Weekes charged, on behalf of County Counsel John D. Maharg, "your eyes were glazed, your behavior was erratic and your dictation of the events surrounding the autopsy was so dissociated that it was all but unintelligible." Rounding off the charge, Weekes said that if two other autopsy surgeons present "had not preserved extensive notes on the autopsy, it is doubtful that any autopsy report of scientific value could have been produced regarding the autopsy of Senator Kennedy."

One by one all of these charges were picked off, neatly fielded and discredited by the unflappable Godfrey Isaac, Dr. Noguchi's brilliant defense counsel, who produced ten witnesses who swore they never heard Noguchi pray for major disasters; expert pathologists who practically wept when they observed the completeness of the Kennedy autopsy; secretaries who said he was a fine boss, put fresh flowers on their desks each Monday and paid for the coroners' Christmas office party out of his own pocket; and still more experts who pointed out that it was no big thing for a Japanese to stand around looking elated during a disaster since "they smile no matter what happens. . . ." Some three thousand pages of testimony and ninety-three witnesses later, the hearings wheezed to a halt and Noguchi emerged, totally exonerated and allowed to go back to his old job as numero-uno coroner in a county that has a larger population than forty-two of the states. Indeed, the ball wound up being thrown

back in the court of his accuser whose own judiciousness was now questioned. The local Japanese were thrilled, the *nisei* saying what a terrific country it was and loving the Bill of Rights and the *sansei* saying come off it, the way to get it on is with Japanese Power and why should we leave the field to the Panthers and the Brown Berets. Plopping down in his old coroner's chair, Noguchi, surrounded by admiring assistant coroners and coronettes, said, "Oh, I feel great, I feel good," and Mrs. Elizabeth Palmer, a secretary who had backed Noguchi at the hearing, seemed to speak for the entire team when she said, "I feel it was a victory for a great boss . . . one that I did not wish to say *sayonara* to."

As a boy in Yokosuka, Tom Noguchi was fascinated by the Zeros at the nearby military base, spending long futile hours trying to shape strips of bamboo into working Zero-like wingspreads. Later, when the American P-51's came over on raids, he was even more impressed by them. "We'd gotten all this encouraging news about how well Japan was doing and then I'd look up at the P-51's and say, "Hey, wait a minute, if we're doing so hot, what are *they* doing here!" But it was the B-29's that really got him. "The first time they came over, I looked up and estimated some five hundred of them in three waves. I was so impressed by the magnificence of the formations that I forgot how dangerous it all was and almost got blown to bits." The raids hammered Noguchi's medical school into rubble, on one occasion causing him to lose a silk umbrella, but the next day it was class as usual, right in the ruins, the students wearing helmets and shoulder pads, the professor handing out exam papers, then scooping them up at the sound of enemy raiders and leaping into a foxhole. "You had to learn to cover the entire exam in the shortest time possible because the professor would sit in the foxhole and score you whether you had finished or not." The grim time for Noguchi was the end of the war, with the coroner-to-be in his first year of medical school, his mother heading up the local Red Cross and the country having its territory sliced away. After four years of hearing the Americans described as "apes with lots of hair and tails," suddenly there they were with their candy and their height and their smiles and their directness and undevousness, qualities Noguchi who had honorable professor'd his way through school and honorable sir'd his way through life had never dreamed existed. All this American stuff really knocked him out and he bought the whole frank, handshaking, open-faced I'm-from-Seattle package right on the spot. Now, twenty-six years later, he is almost parodically American, about as closely related to those shy visiting Japanese who tour Radio City with binoculars as Bella Abzug is to Grace Kelly. To come upon the nation's number-one coroner now, handsome (young Edward G. Robinson, only better), wavy-haired (a teacher once got reprimanded for

calling him a half-breed), shining with fitness (skiing, scuba-diving, sky-diving any day now), brazenly frank ("You're here because I'm controversial, right?"), cheerfully ambitious (he envisions a U.S. Coroner's Office and could probably be persuaded to head it up) is to feel you've met a posterish, big-screen, slightly stylized America Hurrah-Richard Lindner version of all those frank outspoken cards-on-the-table American Virtues, wolfed down without a second thought by the adoring young medical student greeting the G.I.'s in the rubble of Tokyo. You would think the dismissal and those six anguished weeks in the dock—and perhaps a peek at the news from Khesanh—might have made him a bit more subdued, a little suspicious of the open-faced Yank style. He does appear that way for a while, dressed neatly for the interview, ushering you into the "smoking section" of his office (little laugh here) and introducing his wife who is there, too, the Noguchis at home around the coroner's office, very folksy, ABC-TV family stuff. It is the "Bobby Kennedy Death Dance" hearing that has been the touchiest part of his administration and you suggest that perhaps he would prefer to pass over this sensitive area. But before the suggestion is out of your mouth, he becomes frank, ballsy, undevous, never-duck-an-issue G.I.-Tom Noguchi again. "Oh no, no, not at all, I insist on talking about the hearing, no problem." He then tells you that for years the L.A. County Medical Association and the deans of U.C.L.A. and Southern Cal medical schools were used to having a sort of "control" over the coroner's office and more or less naming the coroner. This would work out especially well if one of their people, tired of the university life, wanted a cushy two-year stint in the coroner's office. "But what if one of their surgeons made a little mistake on an incision," Noguchi asked himself, "and what if he suddenly had a little death-by-negligence on his hands." Noguchi decided it just would not do for the coroner to be a captive of the medical schools—or of the police for that matter, who often had to be investigated in questionable shootings. Considered too young, too inexperienced and a bit too independent, he nevertheless got the job for six months, on a probationary basis, with the feeling in the air that they would watch him like a hawk and shoot him down on the slightest technicality. "Within the six months," says Noguchi, "suddenly there was the Kennedy case and the helicopter crash case and I got commendations from all over the world and that took the wind out of their sails. When the hearings finally came up, they never dreamed I would stand up. But you see I just didn't *feel* like an oppressed minority fellow. I didn't feel like a benign and humble little Japanese. There wasn't any question I would fight the charges." As to the support from Japanese groups, Noguchi seems a bit uncomfortable about it; indeed, after meeting with him, it is as easy to imagine him marching shoulder to shoulder with Asian solidarity groups as it is to picture

Philip Roth hosting a Hadassah convention. "A little Japanese food once in a while in Little Tokyo and that's about it. Of course I didn't want to be the first Asian-American, our new term, like black-American, to resign under a cloud.

"The next fellow would come along, fully qualified, and they would say, 'Well, we once tried out one of you guys, a cuckoo little character, and we had to get rid of him, so we can't take a chance on any more of you.'"

But enough of the recent past, he would much rather talk about right now, and also his Yokosuka boyhood, the prankish gadgeteering side of which came to an abrupt ending one day when his younger brother Kazuo developed cerebral palsy and young Tom (then Tsunetomi) told his Honorable Father, a busy eye, ear, nose and throat man, that he would take full responsibility for the sickly fourth-grader. For two years, he carted his brother three miles back and forth to school on a specially constructed bike with the crippled Kazuo strapped to it. One day, the school had a showing of movies and Tom forgot that he had left his brother behind to watch them. He found him hours later, looking at an empty screen in a bare auditorium and since Kazuo couldn't go to the bathroom unaided, he had soiled himself. "I went over and smacked him," says Noguchi, "and then I felt terrible about it." As he tells the story, he lowers his head in mixed rage and shame and he is right back in that Yokosuka movie auditorium, and you feel he might go out a window, though the forty-two year-old Kazuo is doing fine, as owner of a restaurant in Yokosuka that does a brisk business. The bike yarn is revealing in that it points up Noguchi's natural flair for responsibility, but it doesn't really indicate how he got interested in forensic medicine and the coroner game. He is ready for you on that one, telling of a day he happened to be sitting in his father's office when the old man was swabbing with iodine the throat of a young sore-throat victim. Suddenly, the patient keeled over backward, went into a coma and died. Well, it looked like a clear-cut case of negligence, the newspapers and prosecutor insisting that Dr. Noguchi was a careless user of loose cotton and that the patient had choked to death. They don't fool around with fines in Japan. That's three years behind bars under Section 211 of the Japanese Penal Code if he's convicted. But the elder Noguchi took the unusual step—in Japan—of ordering an immediate autopsy, which showed that the cotton had stayed lodged in the young man's teeth and that he had probably died of some weird allergy to iodine. Case dismissed, except that Tom Noguchi, torn at the time between law and medicine, decided it would probably be a good idea to take on both of them—forensic medicine, learning not only the causes of death but the legal aspects of medicine. Well, people don't really do things right on the spot, but it makes a fine "At-that-moment-I-realized-that-the-trombone-was-for-me" type of anecdote and he keeps it on tap for interviews. In any case, that was 1945, the

year of those magnificent B-29 formations and the candy-carrying G.I.'s and Noguchi began to keep a secret eye on the United States ("a country that could beat the hell out of us"), wisely disregarding Japanese nomenclature in the medical texts and asking his honorable professor if he could take his medical exams in English. After that, it was Orange County General Hospital's maternity ward: two hundred babies delivered the first month; hours and hours in the student nurses' ward "just practicing my English"; Barlow Sanatorium to recover from pneumonia and meet Miss Right, Hisako Nishihara, who won his heart by shipping Ozoni and mochi into the ward instead of the traditional "rabbit food"; and finally, on to become head medical examiner in a county of more than seven million potential coroner cases.

Where does a man go after winning the Tate-Joplin-Kennedy coroner's Triple Crown. It's a tough act to follow, but it doesn't matter, because to Noguchi, every death, even the non-famous ones, "has a little twist to it." A furious reader of mysteries (Erle Stanley Gardner, a friend, once called him and said, "A man finds a petrified finger. Go with it"), Noguchi feels that most doctors are too conservative in their outlook and ought to read crazy stuff because sometimes a murderer will get an idea from one. Ninety-nine percent of homicides are ordinary, but one percent are quite wild and if you read the crazies you're equipped to deal with them. To illustrate, Noguchi, in his nice new suit, suddenly falls to the floor, eyes rolling, tongue protruding, to demonstrate a recent crazy case in which a guy was found by his roommate, screaming for help, a towel around his neck. He choked to death and the police were convinced the roommate had helped things along. Clear-cut homicide, right? Uh-huh. Noguchi's autopsy turned up cancer of the stomach; the towel man had indeed choked to death on blood and vomit, but it was not strangulation, and certain towel tests showed there hadn't been any pressure applied by the roomie. Score one more for the coroner's office.

Noguchi insists that whether the deceased is a high-ranked exec at Warner Brothers or a fellow in children's ready-to-wear makes no difference at all, autopsy-wise, and that the basic approach is the same. Each one takes up to six hours, although a heavyweight case, since it involves press conferences and elaborate on-the-scene investigations, will often tie up the coroner for ten days. Noguchi can still recall his first autopsy, back at Nippon Medical School. "The professor opened the plastic bag and frankly, I didn't feel so good." After that, it was business as usual, although with little difficulty he can think of a forensic gaff or two. One involved a fifty-year-old baby-sitter who died, according to the fledgling coroner's autopsy, from a "coronary narrowing." Soon afterward, the concerned parents of a baby that had been under the sitter's care called and said their child had meningitis and did the baby-sitter by any chance suffer

from the same disease. With red face, Noguchi realized that he had not done an examination of the baby-sitter's brain and that he had committed one of his rare coroner-type boners.

As to the general Noguchi style around the morgue, the man who once tried to make Zeros and P-51's out of bamboo is still a relentless gadgeteer, proud, for example, of his department's use of the postmortem angiogram, normally used to locate brain tumors in the living and now, under Noguchi's influence, set to ferreting them out in the dead. Drugs remain an ever-mounting, frustrating, subtle and very often undetected cause of death. "It's easy to bump off a junkie," says Noguchi; "just give him something a little stronger." The coroner is inching ever closer to "an instrument that will deliver precise drug prints much the same as fingerprints and voice prints.

"We don't really understand drug deaths at the moment," the coroner feels. "LSD, for example, is not detectable in the blood under present methods." New York heroin is generally "cut" with quinine (which attacks the heart) and Los Angeles heroin by procaine (which anesthetizes the brain) and what happens is that many deaths result from the "cut" stuff and not from pure heroin. If the medical examiner isn't looking for one of the contaminants, he won't find it and the death (which might have been someone murdering a junkie by giving him an overdose) will go down on the certificate as heart failure.

One question you've got to ask is what's the toughest kind of homicide to solve and, once again, Noguchi feels that it's in the drug department, "the millionaire suffering from heart disease whose heir is a faithful butler giving him medicine and perhaps an extra pinch of digitalis which does the trick." A favorite case of Noguchi's is People vs. Archerd, involving a man who had enormous success pulling off "insulin quickies," disposing of three wives and four relatives in this manner and scooping up their insurance before he was brought to bay. "With all of our science," says Noguchi, a bit mournfully, "insulin in the blood is still very difficult to detect."

Another passion of Dr. Noguchi's is organ transplantation. You need the consent of kin to have an organ donated in California and Noguchi would like to have the whole process speeded up. Kidneys make fine transplants if you can get them going within half an hour after the patient dies. They can be stored in refrigerators for more than thirty hours and flown across the world in that period for use in remote areas of the globe. But it's difficult to get the consent within that half an hour and as far as Noguchi is concerned, he strongly supports a program which would allow any relative to issue permission to donate an organ, provided the nearest relative cannot be found in time. Thus if the surviving spouse is not available, it might be possible to confer with the parents of the deceased. And the Los Angeles coroner's department, with

Noguchi's encouragement, will try to help those who need new organs.

Any day now, Los Angeles will open a spanking new three-and-a-half-million-dollar coroner's building and you would think this would keep Tom Noguchi happy down at the morgue; but sooner or later he begins to speculate dreamily about a United States center for forensic science, perhaps based in Washington, one which would bring together experts in medical engineering, psychiatry, pathology, toxicology, all those skills the coroner has to bring in on his own initiative now and that most small-town coroners obviously don't have at their disposal. "After all, you do want to trust the death certificate, and at the moment, you really can't. If a person in a small town dies after a little accident, his relations are entitled to know if the accident contributed to the death. That would make them candidates for double indemnity. But very often, it goes down as natural causes, because of a lack of expertise in the coroner's office. The same goes for death by rifle wound. The sheriff says suicide and the family has that trauma to contend with. But it may have been an accident that only a medical engineer would be able to discover." And you can't find a medical engineer in Nowheresville, Wyoming.

As to an overall philosophy of death, the busy Noguchi ("This human computer reviews one thousand deaths a year") has not actually had time to cook one up; he does feel that the hang-up about death is that people associate it with pain while in actuality, "the person who dies doesn't suffer a fraction as much as we think." He does not take the Oriental view and see himself coming back for another go-round as an insect. "I'd be delighted, however, to turn up as a fellow who finally gets to finish law school." Noguchi's own dad, the "loose cotton" man, is still alive, still practicing at eighty-three, and recently toured thirty-three states ("There was no holding him back") in a first trip to America. One man Noguchi admired tremendously was John Foster Dulles who, dying of cancer, worked quietly at his desk until the day he went under; Noguchi, too, would like to live until a hundred and ten or so and die with his scalpels on.

Unless he gets a bit too daring as a middle-aged sky-diver, the chances are strong that he is going to be top dog at the L.A. morgue for quite some time to come. Thus, the next Hollywood superstar to wander fatally off life's highway can be assured the personal attentions of the smiling gentleman from Yokosuka, who, aside from a graveyard chuckle or two which won't be heard anyway, will minister to the celeb with a brilliance and expertise born of thousands of trips down the autopsical pike. And as further and perhaps ultimate testimony to the courtesy extended at the L.A. morgue, Noguchi, unable to resist a final macabre rib-tickler, points out that he himself has reserved a slab "upstairs."

"So that I can be assured of absolutely first-rate service." ††