Tres ataúdes blancos
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Antonio Ungar is a young Colombian novelist who was among those chosen as the 'Bogotá 39' group of the most interesting new writers in Latin America. At the moment he lives in Israel, which has perhaps helped him to focus this alternately horrific and yet entertaining satire on the machinations of politicians back in his home country.

The novel begins with a first person narrative by someone we only learn much later is called Lorenzo. The book is made up of short episodes, with the first three setting the scene in a few opening pages. We learn that the narrator is an unlikely hero: he likes to play the 'cello, is grossly overweight, and has a definite drink problem, thinking nothing of downing ten or more vodka cocktails before breakfast. In his fifties, he is still living with his father in the capital city of a country which is here called Miranda (after the 19th century hero of the independence wars against Spain) but is obviously Colombia (although the satire in the book could also be applied to Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, or other Latin American countries where one man tries to perpetuate himself in power at whatever cost).

It is the third short opening episode which provides the launching point for everything that follows. Fresh elections are due to take place in Miranda, and the opposition Movimiento Amarillo (Yellow Movement) thinks that this time it can win, thanks to the charisma of its candidate, Pedro Akira. However, on page two of the book we discover he has been shot three times in the head while eating in an Italian restaurant.

Lorenzo's quiet life is completely disrupted by this attack, due to the coincidence that he is physically very similar to the opposition candidate. This leads him into danger when a former schoolmate Parra appears and makes him an offer he cannot afford to refuse: he will be paid handsomely to stand in for Akira for a month or two until the elections have been won by the opposition. Lorenzo accepts the challenge, and is whisked to the hospital, where the real Akira has just died (the first white coffin). Lorenzo's face is swathed in bandages, and his body hooked up to all kinds of machines, so that he feels he might just get away with the impersonation, especially after he is befriended by Doctor Neira, who has attended Akira, his daughter Ada, who becomes his personal nurse and subsequently his lover, and Jairo, the head of the team of bodyguards looking after him round the clock.

While Akira's body is disposed of, Lorenzo starts to replace him, first in a press conference where nobody sees through his bandage disguise, and then in several public meetings leading up to the election. He believes the party when they say they are bound to win- the plan according to them is to choose a strong vice-president, and then a month or so after the vote announce that Akira has suffered a relapse and died, so that the vice-president can take over.

Things start to go wrong when President Del Pito wins the election as usual, and begins his fourth term in office. Lorenzo slowly begins to realise that he is no longer being protected, but kept prisoner by his guards. The situation turns even darker when Doctor Neira is assassinated in a car bomb explosion (the second white coffin) and when Lorenzo's friend Jairo is replaced as leader of the bodyguards without any explanation.

Lorenzo succeeds in escaping, and goes to find Ada. He has managed to discover videos which prove President del Pito's involvement with death squads who spread terror throughout the countryside and with the drugs traffickers who are the other plague Miranda suffers from. He believes, naively as it turns out, that if he can make these videos public, the country will turn against the president and throw him out.

Once more however his optimism proves short-lived. Instead of turning against the president, the citizens of Miranda apparently applaud him for the tough stance he has adopted. Worse still, the people who publish the information are accused of belonging to the Stalinist Guerrillas who the president claims are behind all the country's ills, and are arrested and tortured.

In a further twist, it becomes clear that the leaders of the Movimiento Amarillo who persuaded Lorenzo to impersonate Akira were in league with President del Pito the whole time, in order to gain some crumbs of power for themselves. In fact, they were the ones who collaborated in the killing of both Akira and Doctor Neira.

Lorenzo and Ada manage to escape from the capital, and for a while live in a tropical paradise on the coast of Miranda. However, when Lorenzo's father is killed Ada realizes they are still in danger, and says she wants to escape from it all by going to live in exile in Europe, especially as she is pregnant. She is even more determined to do so when the pair are captures, but manage to escape by some miracle.

At this point Jairo re-appears and tells his side of the story, confirming that Lorenzo's old school friend Parra was in league with President Del Pito all along. Jairo himself has succeeded in escaping, although he is now in a wheelchair, and has meted out justice to Parra. He and Lorenzo make one last attempt to tell the world what is going on, but this again fails, and Lorenzo is captured once more- this time apparently with no way out. (The third white coffin).

This is the end of the main part of the novel. However, there is also a long postscript, narrated by Ada Neira, at first from her exile in Germany. Through this we learn that she has received all the first part of the novel in the post from Miranda, and we are reading it just as she has done. She also sees videos from Miranda which claim that Pedro Akira is still alive, and leading the resistance to President del Pito. Ada sees this as a sign of hope, and resolves to take her son back to Miranda. The book ends with an open ending, when on a beach back in her native country she sees the shadow of what may be Lorenzo, who could be the person leading the resistance to the dictator.

*Three White Coffins*seems to me a very successful satire on Latin American politics and the dangers of dictatorship in Latin America. It mixes elements of comedy and terror in a very telling manner, and illuminates the situation in a country like Colombia in a way that is far more effective than journalistic reports on deaths and disappearances there. It would translate well into English, and would provide the English reading public with a valuable (and well-executed) description of a very different reality, even if this is shown through a deliberately grotesque lens.