

# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOHNNY THE FOX

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I AM HERE TO tell you the truth about Johnny the Fox. If you've heard the tale that he was born in Puerto Rico, to one human and one inhuman parent, that is true.

Johnny's mother is from the western port city of Mayagüez, where she lives to this day. His father is the northeasterly trade wind that regularly sweeps in and plays along Puerto Rico's northernmost shore and outlying islands.

Many years ago—but not so many that there aren't some folks who still remember—the two met in Arecibo and fell grandly and recklessly in love. The product of their union loves this story, by the way. Johnny the Fox is fond of saying that if you dig under all the hard layers of his being, you'll come to a core that is pure, molten romance. And, really, what could be more romantic than a wind that becomes human to woo its beloved?

But a cynical wink is never far from any of Johnny the Fox's tales, so remember: love has never been enough to permanently tame, or

even reroute, the wind.

If you've heard tales that Johnny the Fox is possessed of magic, the truth depends on the tale.

I've heard it recounted that he collected all the dominoes ever made in Puerto Rico and used his spit to magically weld them together. With them, he constructed a bridge that spanned from Mayagüez to Philadelphia, and that is how he got here from there.

That story, I regret to inform you, is pure fabrication. Johnny the Fox arrived in Philadelphia when he was ten—after a postal carrier hand-cancelled the \$300 in stamps his mother had stuck on his shirt. He was loaded into the cargo hold of one of the daily mail flights with all the other parcels, and within days was delivered to distant relatives in the City of Brotherly Love.

Anyway, that's how Johnny the Fox tells the story. I leave it you to decide whether you believe him or not—but you can Google the history of children sent by parcel post if you think his tale is too tall.

You may have heard the tale of how Johnny the Fox magically sang the snakes out of North Philly. That story is frequently told at a certain bodega in El Barrio—the click of dominoes, the smell of Florida Water and sweet cigars all around—where the teller is, invariably, one of Johnny's compais. That is, one of his buddies. Possibly even an accomplice in one of his cons.

Wasn't it Johnny the Fox who taught Tatán Ortíz, the bodeguero, how to bilk the system by cashing out food stamps for folks who wanted some cigarettes or alcohol along with their government cheese? Tatán eventually got caught siphoning dollars and gave up Johnny in order to keep his bodega. But when the Fox sauntered out of the Big House, there was a table and a cafecito waiting for him, and no grudges were held.

You can read all about the lethal reptiles (and Johnny's part

in extirpating them) elsewhere, but I can, indeed, verify that every successful scheme and plan of his making involves singing. Johnny's magic, you see, has always been in his voice.

As a child in Puerto Rico, Johnny sang his way into grades he didn't deserve and awards he shouldn't have gotten. His warbled incantations compelled schoolmates to give him their most prized possessions. When the wind blew and little Johnny sang, store proprietors fondly tut-tutted his shoplifting; teachers smiled at his disruptions; and truant officers looked the other way.

His mother understood that as Johnny grew older, magic or no magic, people would come to resent his self-gratifying and self-aggrandizing choices. That's when she sent him away, to a city where the powers given to any fairy-tale-begotten child are regularly muted by noise, and traffic, and hardscrabble barrio reality.

But in Philadelphia as Puerto Rico, in adult as in child, magic is magic.

It was Johnny the Fox who first sang "Despacito," to compel domino enthusiast and singer Luis Fonsi into ridiculously slow and distracted play during a tournament of El Domino. Johnny had bet on Fonsi's competitor, and he raked in lots of money that day—though perhaps Fonsi got the last laugh when he changed the lyrics and used Johnny's magical melody for his crossover hit.

Folklorists will tell you there is some confusion in the tales, and sometimes Johnny the Fox is renamed Johnny the Dog.

There is an iron-faced preacher's wife who is responsible for that muddle. When she is the storyteller, Johnny is every bit as sly, selfish, and greedy as usual—but she makes him out to be an indiscriminate mequetrefe and pervert, too. In her stories, he sniffs around every female he sees on the streets of El Barrio as he goes about the business of mischief.

And it *is* true that Johnny admires the curve of a waist, the rise of a breast, and the pert, round bottom that comes from wearing sky-high heels.

But it's also true that the preacher's wife and her husband have been preying on vulnerable barrio residents for years—by setting up fake drug recovery houses where they're paid for months of service by people they kick out the day after they've signed up. When he came out of the slammer, Johnny the Fox was sent to one of their recovery houses.

Now, everyone knows Johnny the Fox's moral compass is broken, but its needle does occasionally hover over a point where indignation and self-interest meet.

So every time the preacher's wife runs into Johnny, she is musically reminded to pay him to not drop a dime on her lucrative scam. On months when there is a flood of the drug-addicted at her door, she might end up hearing Johnny's song three or four times a day. Or, as has happened with some frequency, she might run into him in the company of an inspector friend of his. Then she and her husband are compelled not only to pay the bribe, but to actually provide the services they're supposed to—at least for the week or so after the surprise encounter when Johnny ratchets up noise about the inspector's imminent return.

The thing is, despite knowing she is the mark in his con, the preacher's wife finds herself unable to despise Johnny the Fox. Every time they are in the same room together, she waggles her once-glorious-and-still-not-bad ass at him. No question, he enjoys the sight. But he's got three fine women already—las girlfriends—BFFs who pass him around like a skin of wine that wants to be shared.

Plus, since las girlfriends live in South Philly, whenever Johnny's a suspect in some untoward thing that happens in North Philly in middle of the night, he's got one, two, three alibis.

If you are wondering whether you have seen Johnny the Fox on the streets of El Barrio, he is pretty easy to recognize. He would describe himself to you as a darker, juicier Antonio Banderas, but don't believe that. The truth is, Johnny the Fox isn't bad, but he isn't all that either. He wears too much brilliantine in his copper-tipped hair, lets too much white show in the strap of his beard, and has developed a bit of a gut (which he can hide if he doesn't tuck his shirt in—and who tucks in a guayabera?). His arms are full of New School ink, his eyes full of old-school savvy, and his mouth overflowing with tales told out of school.

He is loved. And hated. And admired. And reviled. And always, he manages to be fully himself, who he is, despite all the ways society tells him not to be.

And this is something you have to understand: even though he is possessed of magic and a grifter's imagination about how to best use it, things don't always end well for Johnny the Fox.

One September day—as dawn struts onto El Barrio's Golden Block with its best salsero vibe—it is revealed that Johnny the Fox is missing.

Tatán Ortiz shuts down his bodega moments after opening it and puts together a posse to look for him in every lock-up in three counties. Johnny's other compais scour all the hang-outs de mala muerte that they've frequented with him. And las girlfriends file one, two, three missing persons reports.

Even the iron-faced preacher's wife goes out on the street in her bathrobe and slippers when she hears, and looks for her beloved nemesis under the cardboard with which blitzed-out addicts cover themselves when they sleep beneath the bridges after a relapse.

For months, everyone believes that Johnny the Fox has met the nefarious end reserved for those who've run a con on the wrong person in Philadelphia. All of them, at one time or another, will try to bribe-

talk-cry their way into the morgue to check for his body.

The Barrio is different without Johnny the Fox in it.

The crooked politicians and unscrupulous operators are all still running their flim-flams on the folks in the neighborhood, but none of them have Johnny's panache, nor his predilection for hitting first and hardest on those with power and money.

Tatán still runs his bodega and its stop-and-go business on the borders of legal, but the stories told within it are ordinary, and nobody seems to have anything remotely fantastical happening in their lives.

Las girlfriends drive their food truck from South Philly to North every day, but their pasteles are too salty and over-spiced now that Johnny's not taste-testing them beforehand.

And the preacher's wife has started considering her husband's proposal to move the business down to Orlando, where the Puerto Rican community is young, and may be less savvy to their ways.

Then, six months to the day after he's disappeared, Tatán Ortíz finds Johnny the Fox shivering, in shirtsleeves and barefoot, on the slushy sidewalk in front of his bodega.

"You're alive," Tatán says as he fumbles with the metal roll-down grate that covers the front of the store during off-hours. "But you won't be long if you keep standing outside like that in this February weather."

Tatán uses the word "tiempo" for weather—a word that also means time—and maybe that's what turns Johnny's expression so haunted that the old man decides to cross himself several times before unlocking.

Tatán makes Johnny sit at one of the tables set out for stop-and-go drinkers and domino players, and brings him a cafecito mixed with lots of sweetened condensed milk to thaw him out. As soon as Tatán's youngest granddaughter, Araceli, shows up for her shift behind the register, he brings more coffee, and parks himself opposite Johnny.

"I imagine there is a tale," he says.

Johnny the Fox nods, quiet except for the chattering of his teeth.

They sit in silence for a long time. Araceli brings them more coffee. During a particularly slow spell around 10 a.m., when no one at all comes in to the store, she goes into the back room and finds an unopened package of cheap tube socks and her brother's next-best pair of Timberlands. She brings them over to the table and waits as Johnny the Fox tries to get them on his frozen feet. Then she goes back behind the register and puts her earbuds in.

"The young don't want to hear the stories of the old," Tatán says, after he turns back from watching her.

"Don't include me among the old," Johnny answers, in what should have been a jokey mock-offended tone. But his words come out breathy, as if the effort to get them out has winded him, and there is no charm—magical or otherwise—in their scraped, wounded tone.

Tatán's eyes narrow. "What happened to your voice?"

"I've been in Puerto Rico," Johnny says with some difficulty.

"Ah." And perhaps Tatán has some small magic in his voice too, because anyone overhearing that one word could read a full narrative in it.

I, in fact, do exactly that when I hear Tatán say it as I walk into the bodega to buy a shot of Old Granddad Bourbon (a little tradition of mine to celebrate when I finish grading papers). Araceli serves the drink from behind the plexi around the register, in what looks like one of the plastic measures packaged with cough syrup. I head with it to a table one over from Johnny and Tatán.

Unlike many of Tatán's stop-and-go patrons, I buy my drinks here more for the company than the alcohol. I've sometimes lingered for hours over a couple of low-cost whiskeys, chatting with the barrio's old codgers about their efforts to see Oscar López Rivera freed from prison. They can really wax eloquent about this icon of the militant

Independence movement, and Puerto Rico's most famous political prisoner. He might as well be a saint—Tatán has kept a candle burning for him on the store's altar shelf for the past twenty years, and the recently announced pardon hasn't changed that fact.

When I sit at my table, the old man gives me a silent hello by touching two fingers to the tatty Basque beret he always wears, then turns his attention back to Johnny the Fox. "It's okay to talk in front of this guy," he says to him. "He may not look it, but he's gente."

Johnny glances at me, nods, but takes at least half an hour to get the first word out in that pathetic new voice of his.

So listen, this is my version of the tale he finally tells:

Johnny the Fox, the son of this hemisphere's northeasterly trade wind, has heard his father's voice gusting in his ear every day of the forty-seven years he's been given so far on this earth.

On September 5th, his father bellows a name—Irma—and a directive—Go to her, son—and Johnny dutifully hops a plane to Puerto Rico.

He disembarks moments before the Category 5 beauty (who has already torn through Florida on her grand tour of destruction) sets her eye on San Juan. Others hurry to claim their baggage, but Johnny the Fox stands on the airport tarmac, singing.

He croons to the winds wrapping around the eye, those long arms of the most powerful of Taíno goddesses. He invokes her as divine storm; the righteous destroyer of walls and divisions created by man; the ultimate test-and-proof for human nature. Johnny's magical melody tunes itself to the one tender spot in the goddess's eye where preparation, prayer and good luck overlap. He spins a magnificent confidence game from that spot—one that propitiates even as it exploits, one that prevails with the mark's own consent.

Feeling herself both revered and truly understood for once, Irma



stands down even as she lets her tears fall. She flicks her skirts in passing—a mere flirtation—then leans down to kiss the edge of the island. More demure than she ever intended to be, she turns out the lights when she leaves.

And since this is Johnny the Fox—Barrio brazen until his last day—as soon as Irma is gone, he sets out on foot across the island. Call it a grifter’s pilgrimage. There are a million ways to take money for tar-sealing a roof you haven’t, for buttressing buildings you won’t, for hurricane-proofing the neighborhood you’ll never set foot in.

It takes Johnny ten days to reach his mother’s house in Mayagüez. He’s got a grin on his face and money overflowing his pockets when he knocks on her door.

This is what you never hear when the tales of Johnny the Fox are told: how he felt about his mother sending him away so young; how he made do without her while growing up in the poorest neighborhood of the poorest big city in the U.S.; how he missed her counsel even with his father’s advice constantly blowing in his ear.

But there are no recriminations in Johnny’s repertoire. At seventy his mother turns out to be just as beautiful as he remembers her; lithe and energetic, with white twists of hair that dance around her face when she laughs. As they sit outside, eating mangoes fresh-picked off her trees, he tells her every tale worth telling from his life, up to and including his recent magical adventure with Irma.

“And now Father tells me there is another hurricane coming,” he says. “Don’t be surprised if this time next week you hear the tale of how Johnny the Fox fast-talked two hurricanes in a row and saved Puerto Rico.”

“Son,” she says after a long moment, “it is a wondrous thing that your last song so pleased the Cacique of the Winds that she decided to go easier on us. But what charms a goddess the first time feels like

manipulation the next, and she won't take kindly to it. Save your magic. Ride out the hurricane in Mayagüez instead, where the West Wind rules. Here. With me."

Johnny reaches over and pats her hand with his mango-sticky ones. "Wouldn't that be a novel twist?"

So does Johnny the Fox heed his mother? Does he put his conceit and magic on mute and hunker down, in the way of all humans faced by superhuman forces they know are beyond their control?

Or does he follow his inhuman father's lead and sweep to the East, pitting his persuasive grifter's gift against Hurricane María's power?

Johnny the Fox is almost to Yabucoa when she rises up before him, grey and solid like a wall, shaking water that falls harder than a river breaking its banks. He holds his hands up to signal he needs a moment, and digs deep to find the perfect melody, the right words. María holds as she is, watching incuriously as he gathers his human and inhuman powers.

Johnny remembers the song with which he lulled the North Philly snakes into torpor, and trebles its coercive strength before he casts it at María. He follows it immediately with what he's long used on the preacher and his wife—appealing to greed and shaming it at the same time. He throws at her each bait-and-switch, bunco parlor, 8-dice-cloth, hall-of-fame skin game he's ever conjured in his rich, undeniable baritone.

She goes so still, he believes he's landed his magic.

And then. And then, she drives his words back at him. Maybe this giantess, maybe this goddess, maybe this hurricane, is a winged thing—because she reaches for him and in one sweep, flays the clothing from his body.

She throws a street sign at him. Then a hundred-foot palm tree still rooted to its ball of earth. Then the roof of a house. She doesn't

kill him outright, but plays like a cat, flinging him around to tenderize him. And when she tires of that, she brings the wires down—crackling and conductive in the water-swollen air—all around him.

On his back in mud, water, and sparks, Johnny the Fox doesn't give up. He opens his mouth again and one sublimely imperative note emerges.

María stops for a moment, then leans in and tears it and the magic it is rooted in, right out of Johnny's mouth. She moves on then, inland, where she'll bring down the grid and plunge the island into a dark six months in the underworld. Three-thousand people (and counting) will die from her rampage through the island.

It is his father's inhuman nature that enables Johnny the Fox to survive. When the storm finally clears, the island is so physically changed, Johnny cannot recognize the landmarks. It is the trade wind's voice in his ear that guides him back to his mother's house to heal his battered body, his bruised psyche, everything but his voice—which will never heal.

Tatán shakes his head, gives Johnny an exasperated look. “No matter how audacious the intent, the outcome was shit. María was so put out by your monumental presumption that she whisked your magic away to teach you a lesson.”

“That's the problem with being a legend in your own mind,” Araceli says, despite the earbuds. “You're never as powerful as you think you are.”

“Hey, at least you stayed in Puerto Rico for months afterward,” I say, feeling a bit sorry for Johnny. “So some good came of it, amirite? You probably helped some folks in the aftermath...”

“Yeah, sure, like maybe he handed out some rolls of paper towels one day,” Tatán interrupts me.

“Or maybe he offered to fetch water for people, one teacup full

at a time,” Araceli says with a snort.

“Or maybe on the flight home he gave his coat and shoes to some poor viejito wearing chanclas and a t-shirt,” Tatán adds. “For a price, of course.”

They keep going, mocking the idea that Johnny would willingly do anything good for anyone, weaving their narrative of ridicule in third person right to his face. He makes pitiful, affronted sounds, and every so often tries, unconvincingly, to protest.

Late in the afternoon, las girlfriends and Johnny’s compais find their way to the bodega, and they take turns riding him too. I won’t vouch for it, but it is entirely possible that the preacher’s wife calls one of their cellphones at one point, and that they hold it up to Johnny’s ear so she can get in on the fun too.

When evening falls, Tatán brings out the good beers, las girlfriends haul a mother lode of Mexican-tamales-posing-as-Puerto-Rican-pasteles from the back of their food truck, and Johnny’s compais loudly sing along to the songs on Araceli’s favorite playlist.

No one stops giving Johnny the Fox a hard time, but they also feed him savory bits of tamal/pastel with their fingers, they toast his survival and clink bottles with him, and they convince him that even though he can’t sing anymore, he can still dance down the bodega aisles with them, to the sounds of Mino Cruz and Princess Nokia.

Someone dips into a stash of out-of-season fireworks, and then we all pour out onto the street in front of the bodega to set them off. A lot of other folks find their way over to us, after the first few go off. It is this way always, here in El Barrio.

Smoke bombs and fountains and ground spinners. By their intermittent light we look into each other’s faces and wonder if there is any difference between cuentistas (liars) and cuentistas (storytellers), and if it even matters any more.

Nothing in Puerto Rico will ever be the same again. And by extension, nothing here will be either.

So the truth about Johnny the Fox is this: there he is, at our heart, living by his wits (as we all are). He is battered and broken (as we all are). He is surrounded by flash and fire, and a community that values resilience above all else. With voice or without, magic lives here as long as we do.

Welcome back, Johnny the Fox.

**Editor's note: At the time of this book going to press, parts of Puerto Rico continued to be without power more than 356 days after Hurricane María. According to the most recent reports released by the Puerto Rican government, there were 2,975 fatalities in Puerto Rico due to the hurricane, not including later deaths due to delayed and interrupted health care.**

