

"With a deft hand, Johnson shows us there's no such thing as 'too young' when it comes to questioning big ideas like manhood, or even family." —**JASON REYNOLDS**,
New York Times bestselling author of *Look Both Ways* and *Stamped*

PLAYING THE CARDS YOU'RE DEALT

Coretta Scott King
Honor Winner

**VARIAN
JOHNSON**





PLAYING
THE CARDS
YOU'RE
DEALT





ALSO BY VARIAN JOHNSON

Twins

The Parker Inheritance

To Catch a Cheat

The Great Greene Heist

PLAYING THE CARDS YOU'RE DEALT



VARIAN JOHNSON



Scholastic Press

New York

Copyright © 2021 by Varian Johnson

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*.
SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or
registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any
responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the
publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc.,
Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are
either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any
resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events,
or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available
ISBN 978-1-338-34853-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 21 22 23 24 25

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, October 2021

Book design by Abby Denning

FOR DAD





CHAPTER 1

The house always wins.

At least, that's what us card sharks say when things don't go our way. It's an old saying about gamblers. No matter how skilled, sharp, or slick you *think* you are—if you ain't smart enough to quit when you're ahead, you'll eventually lose all of your hard-earned money to the "house." Which, for all you youngbloods out there who don't know better, means the casino.

The house. It is all powerful. It sets the rules, it stacks the odds in its favor, and given enough time, it's unbeatable.

Now, every Joplin man worth his salt knows this—even young Anthony. But the thing is, the saying doesn't just apply to casinos. You see, when it comes to *family*

matters, what Ant's daddy usually says is: *Your mother is the house, and the house always wins.*

And that was for sure the truth this morning. Before Ant even touched the knob to the back door, his mom appeared in the kitchen with hands on hips, lips pursed, and eyeballs zeroed in on him.

As us OGs used to say back in the day, youngblood was cold busted.

"Where do you think you're going?" his mother asked. She was already dressed in her usual getup of navy-blue scrubs and white sneakers.

"To school?" Ant offered.

"This early? Without letting me or your father know?"

"I left a note." He offered a sly smile. "I thought you'd be happy that I was trying to be early on the first day."

"Umm-hmm," his mother said, eyeing the torn half sheet of paper Ant had left on the kitchen table. The boy had even tacked on *Love, Anthony* at the end of the note—a little sugar to soothe the sting of slipping out on his parents.

Let's be honest—everybody in that kitchen knew that Ant wasn't getting up all early because he was excited for school. It was more that he didn't want his parents to *walk* him to school on the first day. He knew his mom

was already gearing up to take a gazillion photos of him—first at home, then out on the front porch, and then again next to the big sign by the front doors of Gerald Elementary. Meanwhile, his daddy was probably prepping for one of his legendary first-day-walk-to-school pep talks. Last year’s talk was about peer pressure, and the year before was about focusing in class. Ant had a sneaking suspicion that his father was going to spring The Talk on him this year—the one too embarrassing to name—and there was no way he was sticking around to hear that. Ant wasn’t even interested in holding hands or swapping spit in the first place. Plus, the way he saw it, most of the girls he knew were too bossy, anyway.

So no, Ant didn’t want any part of his daddy’s talk this morning.

And coincidentally . . . if he left early, he figured that his momma wouldn’t be able to ask him about the deck of playing cards stashed at the bottom of his backpack.

His mother finally finished reading the note. “Nice try, sweetie. You get an A for effort. But I didn’t move my shift around this morning just for you to sneak off on me. Now sit down. I’ll scramble some eggs.”

Ant scrunched up his nose. “Does it *have* to be eggs?”
“Keep talking, and I’ll make grits instead.”

Ant clamped his mouth shut. He wasn't a big fan of grits—he thought they tasted like bland, soupy white rice. When his grandma cooked them, he could usually dump enough salt or cheese on them to make 'em edible. But Yolanda Joplin—bless her heart—wasn't exactly skilled in the cooking department. His momma's grits came out more like hard grains of white sand. Wasn't enough salt or cheese in the world to save them.

Ant trudged back to the table and shrugged off his backpack. He didn't get why everyone was working themselves into a tizzy about the first day of school. It wasn't like anything was changing. It was the same building and same students. Honestly, he was looking right forward to returning to something familiar, especially given how much some things had changed at home.

Or rather, how much *someone* had changed.



CHAPTER 2

Ten minutes later, Yolanda Joplin beamed as she plopped a plate down in front of her baby boy. Unfortunately, Ant didn't see anything to smile about. His momma had cooked "Cajun" style again.

In other words, she'd burned the eggs. And the sausage. And even the toast.

Ant picked up his fork, mentally preparing himself for a mouthful of char, but before he could even take a bite, his parents' bedroom door creaked open. Ant looked at his mother.

"Don't worry," she said as she returned to the stove. "He's in a really good mood this morning."

Sure enough, Ant's father came striding down the hallway, wearing that classic Joplin grin. He even had on

a fancy sports coat—you know, the type with the patches on the elbows—and loafers so shiny that they looked like glass. “Ant! Ready for the first day of school?”

Ant smiled—just as much because of his father’s good mood as his clothes. “Whoa! You look gooood, Dad!”

“Surprised your pops can still clean up?” Roland Joplin tugged at his collar, making his tie crooked. “Though maybe I need to invest in a few new shirts. Your mom must have shrunk these by accident.”

“Yeah, or somebody’s midsection expanded,” Ant’s mother said as she prepared another plate.

“What can I say? I don’t want to look *too* perfect. Don’t want to make y’all jealous.” His father sat down. “But forget about me, Ant. Let’s talk about *you*.”

Ant shook his head like a windshield wiper on full speed. “No, tell me why you’re dressed up,” he said. “It’s because of your meeting with Mr. Monroe, right? Are you ready for it?”

“It’s with one of his kids, actually. But let me worry about that.” His father propped his elbow on the table. “So here you are, about to start fifth grade. The king of spades in a pack of clubs. A big joker in a deck of deuces. A jack of—”

“Roland, don’t encourage him.”

“Sorry. Just trying to get on my man’s level. Old card shark to young card shark.” He winked. “Anyway, now that you’re a year older, you might find that you’re having strange feelings in all parts of your body—”

“Ma! Need help with Dad’s eggs?”

His mother laughed as she walked over and set a plate down in front of her husband. “Really, Roland? You want to have this conversation now?”

“Just trying to prep him. You know, I was only a few years older than Ant is when I met you . . .”

“Then why did it take you so long to ask me out?”

“Oh, you know me.” He grinned like a kid on Christmas morning. “I was too busy dating Joyce. And then there was Iesha. And then Kadija from around the way . . .” He put his hands over his heart. “You were too much of a good girl for me.”

Ant glanced at his mom. She was thinking up the perfect comeback. He could see it on her face.

“The way I remember it,” she finally said, “you and your high-water pants weren’t dating anybody.”

“Ohh!” Ant said, cackling at his father. “She said *high waters*.”

“Didn’t you go to your senior prom with your cousin?” his mom continued.

Ant elbowed his father. “She said you ain’t got no game, Dad.”

“The new school year’s starting up, Ant,” his mother said. “How about you replace *ain’t* with something more grammatically correct?”

“Technically, it isn’t wrong, it’s just slang. Aaron says that Black slang should be just as acceptable as regular English.” Ant’s sixteen-year-old brother, Aaron, had lots of opinions on the matter. “He says it’s only cultural bias that—”

“Cultural bias ain’t going to get you into Mitchell Academy,” Ant’s father said.

Ant frowned. “But you just used *ain’t*?”

“As my daddy used to tell me, ‘Do as I say, not as I do.’” Roland turned to Yolanda. “And speaking of technicalities—my prom date was only a cousin by marriage, which we all know doesn’t really count. And I liked those high pants. They were functional. They kept my ankles cool.”

“Whatever the case, you’re lucky I took pity on you.” Ant’s mother draped her arm around her husband and gave him a big wet kiss, right on the lips. “Against my better judgment.”

The sight of Yolanda's mahogany-brown cheeks against Roland's pecan-tan skin would have made most people swoon, but it just made Ant gag.

"Can't you guys wait until I leave?" he asked, trying his best to scrub that smooching sound from his memory. "You know, like, for college?"

"Don't worry," his father replied. "You'll be leaving soon enough. Keep those grades up, and before you know it, you'll be at Mitchell for high school like your brother."

"We have plenty of time to focus on Mitchell Academy." She pointed to Ant's plate. "Right now, you need to eat so I can snap some photos before school."

"Ma . . ."

"Just do it," his father added, picking up his toast. "You've lost this hand before it's even been dealt. The house always—"

"Roland." She sighed. "Enough with the card references."

If you haven't figured out by now, Ant's father was big-time into card games. He could play almost any game, but his favorites were tonk and spades and bid whist. Games that he'd learned to play from *his* pop. Games that he taught to his own two kids—Ant and Aaron.

In fact, it was a Joplin man tradition to play in the

Oak Grove spades tournament . . . and win. Aaron had already proven his worth, winning the teen tournament twice in a row. Ant had competed last year as well, in the junior division. But unlike Aaron's, Ant's results were . . . well, let's just say they were less than satisfactory.

Ant had felt so bad, he hadn't even stuck around to see his brother win. And the oversized grin on his daddy's face when Aaron came waltzing into the house carrying that big old trophy was enough to break Ant's little heart. His father hadn't looked at Ant like that once during his games.

But a year had passed. Ant was older, smarter, and just plain better. And now it was time for him to make up for past shortcomings. Plus, since his brother wouldn't be home from boarding school to compete in this year's tournament, it was all on Ant to uphold the family legacy. To raise that trophy over *his* head while everyone clapped and cheered.

That's why he wanted to get to school early. The tournament was in two weeks—the Saturday before Labor Day—and he needed to get in as much practice as he could.

Ant scarfed down his breakfast—char and all—then jumped up from the table. “Done!” He smiled at his

mother. “Ma, I’m not sure if we have time for all those pictures this morning.”

“Still angling to get out of us walking with you, huh,” she said. “Or are you just trying to leave before I ask you about that deck of cards in your backpack?”

Now, for a ten-year-old, young Anthony was a skilled bluffer. Cool as the fur on a polar bear’s bottom. Ant could have lied about those cards tucked away in his backpack without breaking a sweat.

But there was another old saying that Roland had taught both of his kids—wisdom passed down from his own pop. In the immortal words of the patron saint of card players, Kenny Rogers, also known as The Gambler: *You’ve got to know when to hold them, know when to fold them.*

Ant fished the deck of cards out of his bag and handed them to his father. They weren’t just any cards, but Unicycles—the *only* cards that a true spades player used. The deck was old, but the cards were still crisp enough to make a solid *thwap* when slapped on the table.

Ant watched his father cut the cards with one hand. Ant had been practicing, but his fingers weren’t long enough for that yet. The size of his hands, like the rest of his body,

seemed to be lagging behind everyone else in his grade.

"I was thinking about asking Jamal to come over after school so we can get some more practice in," Ant said. "Is that okay?"

"*Okay?* That's *exactly* what you should be doing!" His father made another one-handed cut. "We'll play when I get home. Me and your momma against you two knuckleheads. If my meeting goes well, I should be home by four at the latest." He leaned close to Ant and whispered, "This year, you're gonna *slaughter* the competition. I know it. Just gotta toughen you up a little more."

Even though Ant kept right on grinning, his insides curled into a tight ball. "Thanks, Dad."

"You know, you could just play for fun," Ant's mother said lightly as she walked over and took the cards from her husband. "*Both* of y'all can have these back this afternoon." She checked the clock. "Alright, let's get a move on. Gwendolyn is only covering me for a few hours."

Roland's megawatt smile faded. "Oh. That's why you're still here. I thought that maybe you decided to go back to working your regular shift. They must be paying you a lot more money to be such an early riser . . ."

"You know me. I like being up before everyone else."

Then she kept right on talking, like a fire hose with a broken nozzle, trying her best to blast past Roland's sour look. "Okay, Anthony, or should I say—Mr. Big-Time Fifth Grader. I suppose you're old enough to walk to school by yourself on the first day . . . as soon as I get some pictures."

Ant groaned.

"Just a few, sweetie. I promise. Now where did I put that phone . . ."

Ant looked at his father. "A little help here?"

Roland was still frowning. Still sour.

"Dad?"

Roland blinked. "Huh, what was that?"

"Can you tell Ma I'm too old for pictures?"

Roland chuckled, and just like that, the moodiness was gone. "You want some advice, Ant?" He cleared his throat . . . then started to sing. "*You got to know when to hold 'em—*"

Ant covered his ears. "Dad!"

"*Know when to fold 'em—*"

"You're supposed to be on my side!" Ant pleaded.

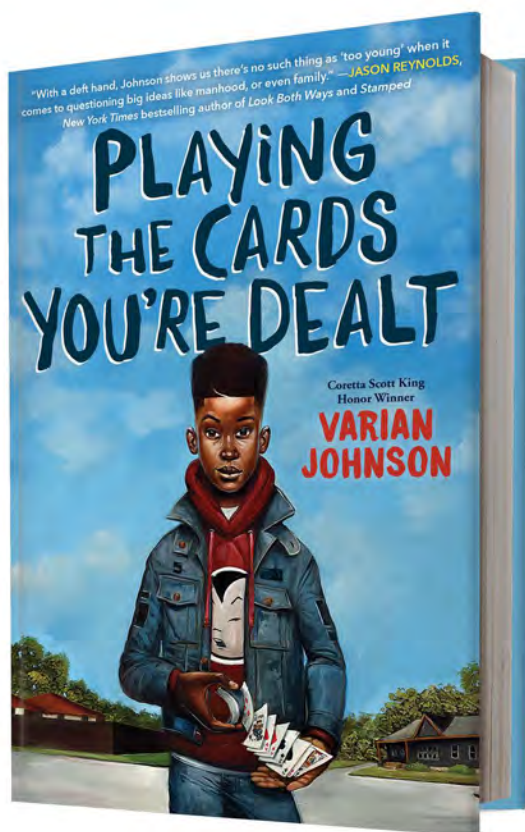
His father stopped singing long enough to shoot Ant an amused grin. Then he turned toward his wife. "Your phone's in the bedroom, honey. I'll grab it." He rose from

the table. “And, Ant, don’t you know—a spades player always backs up his partner.”

Yet another old saying.

His father headed down the hallway, swaying back and forth, singing all the way to his room. “*Know when to walk away . . . Know when to run . . .*”

ORDER YOUR COPY



 Get it on
Apple Books


 amazon.com

BARNES & NOBLE
BOOKSELLERS

 Google Play

BOOKS-A-MILLION™

 kobo

 Bookshop

 INDIE
BOUND™

