

*Second Place Winner*

# The Great Golden Bingo Hopper

*Marrus*

New Orleans artists have hung their paintings at Jackson Square for over a hundred and fifty years. The Square (named for Andrew Jackson, our genocidal seventh president), is a highly-trafficked, rich-tourist-rich environment. Legend goes that the Baroness Micaela Almonester Pontalba, the Grand Dame who transformed a muddy military parade ground into the Parisian-styled park it is today, stated in the City Charter that the antebellum cast-iron fence would only ever be for artists.

This is one story. There are others. Truths, half-truths, hoped-for truths and outright lies are often indistinguishable in this town. Regardless of the provenance, it is a fact that the City is not allowed to charge rent for the spaces.

Still, bureaucracy will extract its pound of flesh, so everyone needs a permit to sell on the Square. However, the number of licenses is limited, and someone has one for life, provided it's renewed each January. Usually, a death must occur for a slot to open, and I would be unsurprised if someone has taken out a hit on someone else to speed up that occurrence.

I'd let mine lapse after Hurricane Katrina, as rebuilding a flooded house took precedence, and I wanted it back.

Opportunities in New Orleans rarely result from resumes. They happen in courtyards, bars, and neutral grounds during Mardi Gras, and this time, intel came from a carriage driver as I scratched his mule's ears. He gestured across the street towards the Amphitheater, where for years, the artists paid a small fee to house the wooden carts containing their supplies and paintings.

“French Market's fixing up the storage area. Everyone's gotta get their stuff out.”

The “storage area” was a ramshackle, rotted-plywood-floored corridor beneath the Amphitheater, from which artists easily trundle their carts across Decatur Street to set up shop. The French Market Corporation, which owns the space, had acknowledged the risk of future litigation for their current death-trap. The roust would facilitate the remodel.

Because it's just so cheap to leave their stuff, many artists retain their licenses, even when they don't live here anymore, just in case they want to sell during busy season. Now that they needed to get out, I suspected they wouldn't bother to renew, which would result in an unheard-of glut on the market.

For first crack at an unknowable number of licenses, every February once saw frozen hopefuls camping out for days in front of City Hall, as if for tickets to David Bowie's Return from the Grave Tour. This scene could get contentious, so the Finance Department is trying a new approach—licenses will now only be distributed via lottery.

The lives of French Quarter denizens twine in intricate intimacies—musicians and mimes, bartenders and bouncers, buskers and brick-and-mortars, tour guides and tarot readers—all ply their trades, above and below board, in a hectic, glitter-spangled, pop-up parade cacophony. Many of these people have been friends or enemies for decades. Many have children together, both acknowledged and not. Many have restraining orders against each other. Many have dumped someone else's cart in the Mississippi River. There are factions and love affairs and rivalries and accusations of theft, some of which are exacerbated by substance abuse or mental challenges. There are slights, both real and imagined, which have bloated over the decades to Hatfield and McCoy proportions. The turf-defending is as vicious as any drug dealer's corner. It's an incestuous, slow moving orgy, with attendant in-fighting, jilted lovers, bitter divorces, and generations of the same family working together in a challenging environment, with little, if any, enforcement of ordinances which might keep the peace. And these are New Orleans artists with different degrees of competency in their business and life dealings.

About fifty of these characters are about to jam themselves into a small, fluorescent-lit back room, to win a license which may very well determine the rest of their financial lives.

Even if I leave empty-handed, this will be *fascinating*.

In February, I head to City Hall, where the Finance Department normally deals with an endless line of frustrated citizens, who are slowly being digested by New Orleans bureaucracy. I squeeze through the Scylla and Charybdis of two armed guards, whose narrowed eyes are tracking the tableau of clustered hopefuls. Some sit silently, head down. Some are glaring at each other. Everyone is sweating. The air, fraught with excitement, greed, and hope, is punctuated by pops of nervous laughter.

More people push into the already cramped, moist room. Never once do those guards remove their hands from their pistols. They wouldn't be on such high alert if something shitty had not gone down at some point.

A swarthy man vibrating two chairs from me is muttering. "I've been \*bleeping\* painting on \*bleeping\* Bourbon for five \*bleep\* \*bleep\* years. I \*bleeping\* NEED one of these \*bleeping\* things. I can't stand \*bleeping\* BEING out there anymore. I better \*bleep\* get one..."

He wasn't really saying "bleep."

Scotch-taped to a wall is an oversized piece of paper, upon which a magic marker grid has been scrawled. As they file in, each artist is handed a ping-pong ball with a sequential number written on it—again, in magic marker.

The reason for this is a large, golden bingo hopper in the center of the room.

One by one, each ping-pong ball is deposited into the Great Golden Hopper. Fifty pairs of eagle eyes ensure there are no kickbacks, preferential treatment, nepotism, or other forms of fuckery afoot.

In short order, the ball-dropping ritual is over. The paperwork is in order. The room is silent. The tension is thick. The administrative staff is masking their giggling—poorly.

The Hopper spins.

The first number pops up. Everyone applauds.

The Hopper spins.

The next ball prompts less enthusiastic cheering. It is dawning on everyone that each ball lowers the chances that their number, literally, will come up.

The Hopper spins.

This is what passes for bureaucratic process in the Caribbean's northernmost port.

The angry man is still swearing, but I know he will be unsuccessful, as surely as I know that I will soon be celebrating my golden ticket. Trying to force New Orleans into doing something she doesn't want to do rarely works out.

The Hopper spins.

The winners sort themselves into a congratulatory clique. For now, they are all happy together in their success. Once everyone is working on the street, however, the chances are good that this joyous camaraderie will diminish.

The Hopper spins.

My ball pops up seventh.

The game is over. The fellow next to me explodes in a fury from the room, doomed to another hellish year on Bourbon Street. For the rest of the less fortunate, there are condolences and tears, and the opportunity next February to put their hope-laden ping pong ball into the Great Golden Bingo Hopper, and I leave, not only grateful for my license, but that the cops never once had to unholster their guns.