

THE LOST BAYOU

by Warren Swenson

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THE STORM

Down here in the bayous
Of south Louisiane
Early every morning
All the fishermen
Gather on the piers
Where, working in the dark,
They prepare their gear and tackle
And get ready to embark.

Fishing here is not a sport
Here it's a way of life.
After all, Louisiana is
A fisherman's paradise.
But with all the swamps and marshes
And the bayous here of course
While fishing here one must take care
Or else one could get lost.

Now that's where I come in,
My name is Jacques Pierre
And I've lived here in the bayous
For nearly forty years.
I'm the captain of a charter boat
Which means I make my living
Taking people through the bayous
To go sight seeing and fishing.

If there's one thing any captain
Will avoid at any cost
It's having to admit to anyone
That they've been lost
But that's what I am about to do
For though I am renowned
For knowing all the bayous
For a hundred miles around

THE LOST BAYOU

There is one where I once was lost
And only once have been
And since have not been able
To find that bayou again.
I know it will make little sense,
What I'm about to say,
But it seems to find this Lost Bayou
One has to lose their way.

This paradox will make more sense
After you all hear
Who I met and what happened
When I got lost back there.
For when you hear my story
You'll know why I feel compelled,
Despite admitting I was lost,
This story now to tell..

It happened several years ago,
The day before Thanksgiving
When I was in my pirogue
Out on the bayous fishing.
The day started off raining
But I thought it would get better
So I really wasn't paying much
Attention to the weather.

By noon the rain came down so hard
I could not see at all.
I thought my pirogue drifted
Underneath a water fall.
As quick as I bailed water out
The pirogue filled with more.
Convinced that I might drown before
I ever reach the shore

I hit the pirogue with the pail
And hollered loud and strong,
"Is there anyone else out there
Who can help me through this storm."
At exactly that same moment
I felt a big Ka-Thump
A jolt of pain went through my head
My forehead had a bump

THE LOST BAYOU

Whether a tree limb hanging low
Had gotten in my way
Or with the pail, I hit my head
I really cannot say
But I've no doubt that I blacked out
Momentarily
For that bayou, when I came to,
Looked quite different to me.

Although the rain still steady came
There was no need for bailing
For pulled by currents strange and strong
I felt my pirogue sailing.
Then through the heavy downpour
In the distance I could see
The towering and massive shape
Of two huge cypress trees.

They looked just like the skeletons
Of ancient sentinels.
When I passed beneath their branches
I could feel myself tremble.
Dressed in the tattered rags of
Pale green Spanish moss
They stood to challenge anyone
Who dared their path to cross.

Though I had traveled through the swamps
A thousand times or more
I'd never seen nor crossed between
Those cypress trees before.
I drifted deep into the swamp
And then I saw the camp.
It wasn't far ahead
And in it's window was a lamp.

I saw the front door open
As I drifted toward the landing.
Then in the outline of that door
There was someone standing.
He quickly ran on down the pier
And with his arms so strong
He lifted me out of the boat
And carried me along

THE LOST BAYOU

To the open cabin door,
Through all the rain and wind.
Then he very quickly shut the door
After he got me in.
He wrapped me in a blanket and
Pointed to a door,
"Go take your wet clothes off
And leave them on the floor

Put this robe around you and
When you're finished then
I should have some hot cocoa
Already for you friend."
I stood a moment mystified,
For I was very sure
I'd never met this gentleman
Nor seen his camp before.

See, down here in the bayous
We're a small community
And we all know each other
So I wondered who was he?
But I was so exhausted
So tired and so cold.
I didn't even ask him
I just did what I was told.

I took those wet clothes off
And then I toweled down
I put on his red flannel robe
And wrapped the blanket round.
About that time a knocking
On the bathroom door I heard
As that wonderful old gentleman,
True to his own word,

Said, "Son, now come on out
Your hot cocoa is ready."
He helped me to a chair,
For I was tired and unsteady.
That hot cocoa just warmed me up
And it was about then
I felt like I would pass out
As my head began to swim.

THE LOST BAYOU

He led me to this massive bed
And I must confess
Though I wanted to I was just too
Exhausted to protest.
While I was drifting off to sleep
I wondered once again.
Where was this place that I had found?
Who was this gentleman?

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THE STRANGER

From my sleep I was awoken
By the distant hollow chimes
Of an old grandfather clock
That was sounding out the time.
At first I thought, it's four o'clock
In the afternoon.
Til I looked outside the window
And I saw the stars and moon.

By the fireplace across the room
In his easy chair
I saw the older gentleman
Studying something there.
I couldn't see just what it was
With only candle light
But it seemed to be some kind of list
That he was checking twice.

He looked over his glasses
And he said, "You get some rest.
And in a while I'll make us
A very good breakfast."
I wondered as I lay there
Just who could this fellow be
There was something about him
That seemed familiar to me

Though I felt like I should know him
I still was very sure
Without a doubt I'd never met
This gentleman before
I searched the cabin with my eyes
Hoping that I might see
Something that would tell me
Who this gentleman might be.

THE LOST BAYOU

Twas a spacious one room cabin
That was shaped just like an “L”
And from where I was laying
The best that I could tell
On the center of the inside wall
Was where the bed was placed
And on the wall across the room
There was a fireplace.

In those damp and chilly hours
Of the very early morn
A fire danced there merrily
To keep the cabin warm
And to dry my rain drenched clothes
That were very neatly stacked
By the red brick fireplace
On a sturdy wooden rack.

In the corner of the cabin
Was a kitchen neatly spaced
With everything arranged on shelves
And each thing in it's place.
The cabinets were all hand carved
And highly polished so
Each panel had a warm reflection
Of the fires glow.

The curtains and the drapes
Were the brightest plaid I've seen.
They were candy apple red
And a very kelly green.
So also was the braided rug
That laid upon a floor
Made of highly polished cypress wood
As were the walls and doors.

The furniture was all handmade
The dresser and a pair
Of matching night stands by the bed
A table with eight chairs.
The craftsmanship was so superb
The best I'd ever seen.
Carved out by a masters hand
Not built by some machine.

THE LOST BAYOU

The cabin was so beautiful
Each corner was so cheery
I couldn't find the smallest crack
That looked the least bit dreary.
But neither could I find
Anything that I could see
That gave a clue as to just who
This gentleman might be.

Just then he rose up from the chair,
And smiled with his eyes.
"If you want to put your clothes on
I think you'll find they're dry."
I felt refreshed and well rested,
So I got out of bed.
I found my clothes were more than dry
They were practically toasted.

I had to let them cool.
The buttons were too hot to touch
But being more than grateful
I said, "Thank-you very much."
While I dressed in the bathroom
He was cooking, I could tell
As the cabin started filling
With the sweet and pungent smell

Of the coffee and the pancakes,
And the bacon, eggs and grits.
And I thought to myself, Jacques,
It doesn't get better than this.
When I sat down at the table
Where he'd set for me a place
He reverently bowed his head
And said a simple grace.

Then said, "You must eat heartily
To build your strength again
So please don't try to be polite
By eating little, friend."
The fact is I ate very well
Of that you can be sure.
But to tell the truth, I do believe
He ate a little more.

THE LOST BAYOU

When I offered to help clean up
He wouldn't hear of it.
He told me, "Please go sit down there
While I take care of this."
I told him, "Sir I must help,
Please, I really do insist."
He looked at me with a stern eye
And said, "you are my guest."

I know people here are famous
For their hospitality,
But that gentleman was treating me
Like I was royalty.
He had no sooner started
Then he was already done
And though I knew that it was work
He made it look like fun.

"Now Captain Jacques Pierre," he said
Addressing me by name
Which left me rather startled
Wondering how it was he came
To know just who I was
Though he chose not to explain
But, ignoring my reaction,
Continued on the same.

"It will be several hours
Before you can get along
And you will need the help
Of my good old friend Tuson
To lead you through the swamps
Back to that same bayou
Where you were yesterday
Before the storm overtook you.

But first Captain, I'll need the help
Of my good friend Tuson
To finish up some work
That I really must get done.
Of course you're welcome to stay here
That is if you want to,
Or you can come along with me
Whichever pleases you."

THE LOST BAYOU

Without any hesitation I said,
“I would like to go.”
And from his smile I could tell
He really wished it so.
As he started to get ready
I kept wondering why he
Apparently chose not to
Introduce himself to me.

Could it be he thought I knew him
Inasmuch as he knew me
And should I ask of him his name
Offended he might be.
And so I chose just to observe
While searching through my mind
Hoping of him some lost or distant
Memory to find.

Though he was rather short and stout
He was very strong.
He had a curly snow white beard
That was fairly long.
Both his cheeks were rustic red
Just like two boiled crawfish.
His nose, just like a plum was plump
And slightly purplish.

What I saw next surprised me so
I almost tripped and fell.
On the head board of the bed
Was carved the name "Papa Noel".
Then, just as if he heard my thoughts
He turned and looked at me.
“Perhaps you are now wondering
If I could really be

One and the same with him whose name
On that head board you see.
So tell me now what do you think?
But do think carefully
It won't be with your head
But with your heart that you will tell
Whether or not I am, in fact,
Good Old Papa Noel.”

THE LOST BAYOU

I was absolutely certain
Even more than of my name
That Papa Noel and my friend
Were both one and the same.
“Jacques Pierre are you still here,”
Questioned Papa Noel.
You look amazed and slightly dazed
Are you not feeling well?”

I was so shocked and so amazed
So startled I am sure
I couldn't answer with my mouth
Still dragging on the floor.
I shook myself then found my tongue
And then I heard me say
“Papa Noel I cannot tell,
I've never felt this way.”

“Most people do react that way
The first time they meet me
But given time you'll feel just fine
Captain, I guarantee.
Now Captain I still do have work
I really must get done
So it is time for us to leave
And meet with Big Tuson.”

I walked outside the cabin door
With so many questions
Like why was Papa Noel here?
What work had to be done?
Why did I ever tell him
I wanted to come along?
And who was he we were to meet,
This fellow named Tuson?

THE LOST BAYOU

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THE RACES

(To the Cadence of the Night Before Christmas)

We walked out the cabin
And down to the pier
Where a strange looking skiff
was tied up out there.
To tell you the truth
It looked more like a sleigh
And I thought to my self
There just is no way,

Without motor or oars,
That this skiff can run
And it didn't appear
To have either one.
But knowing that he
Had work to get done
And grateful that I
Was going along

I did as he said
Without a question..
Then he kicked the boats bottom
And hollered "Tuson"
Then with a ka-thump
The next thing I knew
We were already sailing
On down the bayou.

I looked over the side
A few moments later
And what did I see?
T'was a huge alligator.
On top of his back
The skiff was straddled
And we rode on his back
Just like a saddle.

THE LOST BAYOU

We sailed down the bayou
And straight for the shore
To a place I was sure
I had not seen before.
It was a small inlet
You barely could see.
And through it we glided
Very quietly.

When finally through
This inlet we passed
We came to a bayou
That was slicker than glass
With little red beads
Floating on the water
That were moving in
No particular order.

It took me a moment
Before I realized
They weren't red beads
They were red gator eyes.
Then Papa Noel put a
Strong hand on me
And said, "Captain Pierre,
You just watch and see."

He clapped his hands twice
And just moments later
They formed out eight lines
With each five alligators.
Then Papa Noel
Clapped his hands once again
And the first five took off
Down the bayou my friend.

That's when I realized
That here in this place
Papa Noel was holding
A race.
They churned the water
So much so
That under the moonlight
The foam looked like snow.

THE LOST BAYOU

When the gators reached
The bayous end
They all turned around
And took off again.
The first one back
To the skiff would win.
This they would do
Seven more times again.

And so it was not
Even one hour later
That Papa Noel
Had eight alligators.
Each of the gators
Had earned their place
On the Christmas team
By winning their race.

Then he threw out a harness
Into the water
And each alligator
Lined up in order
As Papa Noel
Called out their names
And this is the order
In which they came.

Tuson and Chanelle,
Marie and Robert (Row-bear)
LeJohn (Lay-Shan) and Rochelle
Cherie and Pierre
As they each took their place
All I can say
Is I knew why that skiff
Looked a lot like a sleigh.

He clapped his hands twice
And off they all flew
As we headed again
On down that bayou.
But this time, when we
Reached the bayou's end,
Something incredibly
Different happened.

THE LOST BAYOU

To the side of the skiff
I firmly grapped hold
As my eyes got as big
As two gumbo bowls
When those alligators
Took to the sky
And over the tree tops
We started to fly.

Said Papa Noel,
"Don't worry Pierre,
This isn't much different
Than flying riendeer."
"Now Papa Noel
That my be so.
But I've not flown with reindeer
I think you should know."

So he turned it around
And the next thing I knew
We were gliding down gently
Into the bayou.
It wasn't more than
Five minutes later
He'd taken the harness
Off the alligators.

A mark on their head
Each of them received
And then he told them,
I do believe,
To be there promptly
On Christmas Eve.
Then he called for Tuson
We were ready to leave

As we headed for camp
I know he could see
That there was a question
Troubling me.
As if reading my thoughts
He said "Captain Pierre
I guess you are wondering
Where are the reindeer.

THE LOST BAYOU

For the most part I travel
With reindeer, that's true
But not when I'm down
Here in the bayous.
Just look all around you.
All over you'll see
Down here in the bayous
These huge cypress trees.

It makes it hard
For the reindeer to fly
And that, Captain Pierre,
Is the reason why
They wait at the camp
Till I get back later
And I travel the bayous
With eight alligators.

Down here in the bayous
It is much harder
To travel by air
Then to travel by water.
But when it is time to
Take to the sky,
As you learned today
Alligators can fly."

Back at the cabin
I sat in his chair
As he sat himself down
And said, "Captain Pierre,
By all you have seen
I am sure you're amazed."
But what he said next
Left me totally dazed

As he said,
"But it's time Captain Pierre
That I told you the reason
I had you brought here."
Though I was amazed
More amazed I would be
When Papa Noel
Told the reason to me.

THE LOST BAYOU

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THE REASON

(Back to regular cadence)

As I sat there in Papa Noel's
Big brown leather chair
Wondering just why it was
That he had brought me there
Filled with anticipation
And a little tinge of fear
I listened quite intently
As he said, "Captain Pierre,

I'm sure you thought you just got lost
In that big thunderstorm
But the fact is you were brought here
By the gator named Tuson
Who acted on my orders
And not on his own of course.
So in a way you could still say
That you've never been lost.

I brought you here Captain Pierre
Because I need your help
To do something that I want done
That I can't do myself.
It's something I want to have done
For dear Mama Noel,
It's something I know you can do
And do it very well.

But first, for you to understand
What I want to have done,
You'll need to know, Captain,
That Mama Noel is Cajun
Which shouldn't be a big surprise
For her great Cajun cooking
Is what keeps me in such great shape
And keeps me so good looking.

THE LOST BAYOU

Her love and spice has filled my life
With so much Cajun flavor
I vowed one day somehow someway
I would return the favor.
I'll tell you now just how that vow
I'll keep Captain Pierre.
What Mama Noel would enjoy
At Christmas time each year

Above everything else
Is finding someway she can share
Her southern Cajun heritage
With children everywhere.
And that's where you come in Captain,"
Exclaimed Papa Noel,
"For I hear that you are famous
For the stories you can tell.

She has Cajun Christmas stories
She wants told that I am sure
Have never been told anywhere
By anyone before.
Telling these Christmas stories
Is what I want you to do.
You can tell about my cabin
Hidden on a lost bayou

You can tell about the gator team
That pulls my Christmas skiff
Through the bayous every year
To deliver all the gifts.
You can tell about the Texan Cajun
Gator named Tuson
Or the great gator from Florida
We call Little LeJohn. (lay-shon)

You can tell about the little
Red crawfish named Boudreaux.
Oh, there are so many stories
That the children ought to know.
Now, is this not something, Captain,
That you would love to do?
So tell me Captain, tell me please
Can I depend on you?"

THE LOST BAYOU

I sat there flabbergasted
Then I told Papa Noel,
“You have so many stories
That you want me to tell
And there’s nothing I’d love more
Than to tell all these stories
But first some one will have to
Tell all these stories to me.”

He smiled as he said to me,
“Then for you I have a gift.”
And in my open hands he placed
A little red crawfish.
It started clacking both it’s claws
And then it started squeaking
And then the next thing that I knew
I heard that crawfish speaking.

“Please tell me Papa Noel, please
What am I to do?”
“Just be polite and listen
To what he is telling you.”
He said “Hello, I am Boudreaux.
Captain how do you do?”
“I think I’m fine little Boudreaux.
So tell my how are you?”

Like a small excited child
I could see it in his eyes,
Papa Noel was delighted
With my joy and my surprise.
With a smile then he told me,
“Captain, you must understand
Just what gift you have been given
For if you should with your hand

Touch any living creature
You will find, Captain, that you
Will be able to talk to them
And they too will talk to you.
They will tell to you the stories
That I’m asking you to share
Every year at Christmas time
With the children everywhere.

THE LOST BAYOU

Now there is one final thing
You should know Captain Pierre,
So long as you love God's creatures
So long shall the gift be there."
I could find no words to say
But to simply say, "Thank you."
To which he quickly responded,
"It is I who should thank you."

Captain you cannot imagine,
Just how much this means to me.
Making Mama Noel's Christmas
Dream become reality
Has been a dream of mine
For oh so many years
And with your help it will come true
Captain Jacques Pierre."

I promised him, "Papa Noel
You can depend on me.
I'll do my best."
"I know you will and you will succeed.
Well Captain," he said as he stood,
"We both have much to do,
I at home at the north pole,
And you in the bayous.

Though I would love to visit more
We both should get along
So once again it's time for us
To meet with Big Tuson.
Who will guide you through the swamp
Back to the same bayou
Where you were yesterday
Before the storm overtook you."

When we walked outside his cabin
As I put my jacket on.
And I stepped into the pirogue
He hollered, "BIG TUSON"
Then with a big ka-thump
The next thing that I know
My pirogue started moving
Sailing straight down the bayou.

THE LOST BAYOU

When I turned to wave good-bye
I could see there by the pier
Papa Noel hitching up a sleigh
To all of his reindeer.
Then he flew over the bayou
But before he disappeared
I heard him say, "We'll meet again
Captain Jacques Pierre."

As I drifted through the swamp
The thought drifted through my head
Did Papa Noel really say
The things I thought he said
Or was I passed out washed up
On the shore of some bayou
Waiting to wake up and find
That none of this was true?

THE LOST BAYOU

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THE BEGINNING

Suddenly I realized
I was somewhere that I knew
Sitting in my pirogue
Back on the same bayou
Where I had been the day before.
Then several moments later
I noticed in the water
This humongous alligator

Dare I believe the words
I thought that Papa Noel said
As carefully I reached to touch
That gator on his head?
Then told him "Thank you Big Tuson
For bringing me back here."
He turned his head and then he said,
"You're welcome Jacques Pierre."

So it was more than just a dream.
It happened, it was true.
I had met Papa Noel
At his camp in the bayous.
I had the gift he gave to me
And I had work to do
There were so many creatures
I wanted to interview.

So many stories I would learn,
Stories that I now share.
They're Mama Noel's Christmas gift
To children everywhere.
That's how my Cajun Christmas
Storytelling all began.
And now they tell these stories
Everywhere across the land.

THE LOST BAYOU

I still love to go fishing
All alone on the bayous
But now I find I'm wishing
Almost every time I do,
Somehow one day I'd lose my way.
Though strange it sounds it's true.
For maybe then once again
I'd find the Lost Bayou.