Ruthie, the Duck Girl

It’s the Monday after Hurricane Gustav, and in Greenwood Cemetery, rain is pouring down on the mourners. Ruthie doesn’t mind the rain. It’s good for the ducks. The artists, dancers, and musicians who don’t like to stray far from the French Quarter don’t let that or a hurricane stop them from saying their final goodbyes to the Duck Girl.

For fifty years, Ruthie was a fixture in the French Quarter. Some called her eccentric; some called her simple. I remember the first time I saw Ruthie, a thin girl with a sweet smile. She appeared like an apparition rolling down the middle of Bourbon Street, her long white skirt flowing around her, her ducks trailing behind her. She seemed weightless as she glided by.

Tourists stopped to take pictures of Ruthie dancing and singing on street corners or skateboarding the streets and alleys of the French Quarter with her ducks. Until her health failed, she spent many nights at Pat O’Brien’s and other local bars, with her water fowls waddling at her side.

A Mass was held for the Duck Girl at Jacob Schoen Funeral Home. Chris Rose in The Times Picayune quoted one of Ruthie’s mourners who spoke her farewell from the altar: “She did not walk the stage, a poor player. She was just Ruthie. She was a light that was happy and alive. This thrilling little person--she gave just by being herself.”

--by Elaine McDermott