There was a village, somewhere to the west, nestled in the shelter of a tall hill called Gorubun because of its crooked shape. From the top of this hill you could just see the blue promise of the ocean, and when the weather was right, the wind would carry the salt smell of the sea from the distant shore.

Every morning at dawn, the wise men of the village sent four scouts up the hill, and the four scouts would sit back to back, looking east, west, north, south to warn if any trouble might be headed their way. At dusk, four fresh scouts came to relieve them, and all through the night the new scouts sat, as the stars rose and black night bled away to morning again.

But the village was unremarkable, with nothing worth stealing, and attracted attention from neither thief nor marauder. And so, year after year, the scouts returned from the hill with little to report except pleasant breezes and stray sheep grazing outside their pastures.

Strong backs were needed to work the fields, and it seemed a waste to lose four good laborers each day and night, and so during one harvest, three of the scouts were permitted to remain down in the village and just one scout was sent to climb the crooked hill. When the harvest ended and there had been no trouble, the wise men of the village didn’t so much decide not to reinstate the other scouts, as they forgot to order them up the hill.
again. One scout still climbed the slope every morning and another replaced him every night, and if one of them occasionally fell asleep or the other spent his hours kissing Marina Trevich, the stonemason’s daughter, who was to know?

Lizabeta lived on the western outskirts of the village, far from the shadow of Gorubun. Each day she walked out to the meadows beyond her family’s home to tend to their hives. She wore no gloves or bonnet. The bees let her take their honey without a single sting. There, where wild white roses grew in clouds of blossoms so profuse they looked like mist rolling in over the fields, Lizabeta would pray and think on the great works of the Saints, for even then she was a pious and serious girl. And there she was, the summer sun hot on her bent head, the bees humming lazily around her, when a breeze came from the west carrying not the salt-soaked tang of the sea but the smell of something burning.

Lizabeta ran home to tell her father. “It’s probably nothing,” he said. “The village due west is burning their trash. This is none of our concern.”

But Lizabeta could not shake her unease, so she and her father walked to the neighboring manor house, the home of a prosperous and well-respected citizen. “Your father is right,” he assured her. “It’s probably nothing. Perhaps a roof caught fire. This is none of our concern.”

And yet still, Lizabeta could not calm her restless thoughts, and so, to appease her, the merchant and her father accompanied her all the way into the village square to see the wise men, who gathered there beneath the red elm tree. Each day they would drink kvas, eat fresh bread brought to them by their wives, and puzzle over the great mysteries of the world.
When Lizabeta spoke of the scent of smoke blowing in over the meadow, the men said, “If there were any trouble, the scout atop Gorubun would give warning. Now leave us to think on the mysteries of the world.”

All agreed with the wise men of the village. The merchant returned to his manor house, and Lizabeta’s father took her home. But when Lizabeta sat and prayed among the hives, no peace came to her. So back through town she went and up the crooked hill; alone she climbed the narrow path. On the slopes of Gorubun, there was no stink of something burning, and the pastures seemed green and peaceful. She began to feel quite silly as her legs grew weary and sweat bloomed on her brow. Surely such concerns could be left to her father and the merchant and the wise men of the village.

Still she pressed on, between rocks and boulders, feeling more foolish with every step. When she reached the top of the hill, she found the scout snoring peacefully beneath his cap with his long legs stretched out on the soft grass. The air was fresh and clean, but when Lizabeta turned to the west, she saw a terrible thing: columns of smoke like dark pillars holding up a heavy sky. And she knew that it was not just refuse she’d smelled burning or a kitchen fire. She’d caught the scent of churches set alight and bodies too.

She ran back down the hill, fast as she could without falling, and into the town square.

“An army!” Lizabeta cried. “An army is marching!” She told them she’d seen pillars of fire, one for each town between their village and the sea. “We must gather swords and arrows and go to our neighbors’ aid!”

“We will discuss it,” said the wise men of the village. “We will raise a defense.”
But when Lizabeta had gone, and they were no longer faced with the pleas of a frightened girl, the idea of a war seemed far less heroic. The wise men had all been children the last time fighting had come to the village. They had no desire to pick up blades and shields. They did not want to see their sons do that either.

“Surely the soldiers will pass us by, as they always have before,” the wise men told themselves. And they went to have dinner and to ponder the great mysteries of the world.

When dawn came, Lizabeta went out to the meadow to wait for the brave men of the village to arrive with their swords and shields. She waited as the sun drifted higher and the bees hummed around her. She waited as the roses wilted beneath the heat, their white petals browning at the edges. No one came. Until, at last, she heard marching footsteps, not from the direction of the village, but from the darkness of the woods. She heard voices raised in battle song and felt thunder through the earth. She understood then that there would be no rescue.

But Lizabeta did not turn to run. When the men appeared, ferocious and covered in blood and soot and sweat, mad with the taking of lives and treasure, Lizabeta knelt amid the roses. “Mercy,” she pleaded. “Mercy for my father, for the merchant, for the wise men who cower in their houses. Mercy for me.”

The men were mad with bloodlust and triumph. They roared as they rushed the clearing, and if they heard Lizabeta’s pleas, their steps did not waver. She was a sapling before them to bend and be trampled. She was a river that must part. She was nothing and no one, a girl on her knees with prayers on her lips, full of terror, full of rage. From the hives surrounding the clearing came a low, thrumming note, a song that rose, vibrating through the air. The bees emerged in
dense, whirring clouds, like smoke from a village set ablaze, swarming over the soldiers, swaddling them in crawling bodies, and the men began to scream.

The soldiers turned their backs on Lizabella and her tiny army, and ran.

If only this were where the story ended, Lizabella would be made a hero, a statue of her raised in the town square, and the wise men would meet beneath it each day to remind themselves of their own cowardice and to be humbled in the shadow of a girl.

But none of these things came to pass. Word spread, of course, that the raiders had come to the coast and marched inland. But no one outside the village knew why they'd suddenly changed their course and fled back to the sea. There were rumors of some fantastical weapon, others of a terrible plague or a curse brought down by a witch.

Word of the town that had been mysteriously spared reached a general who was assembling a great army to face the raiders when they returned. With a few of his best men, he marched to the village where the enemy had ceased their invasion. He went to the wise men who met in the town square, and when he asked them how they had turned the tide of battle and sent such fearsome enemies running, they looked to one another, afraid of what the general might do if they told him silly stories of girls and bees. “Well, we cannot say,” the wise men offered. “But we know a merchant who can.”

When the general reached the manor house, the merchant said, “It is difficult to explain, but the beekeeper down the road will know.”

And when at last the general came to Lizabella’s home and knocked on the door, her father saw the fearsome men with their armor and their hard faces and he trembled. “I cannot be certain
what happened,” he told them. “But surely my daughter will know. She is in the meadow, tending to her hives.”

Lizabeta met them there. “What made the enemy turn in their tracks?” demanded the general of the girl in the meadow. “What made them flee this nothing of a village?”

Lizabeta told the truth. “Only the bees know.”

Now, the general was tired and angry and had walked many miles only to be taunted by a young girl. He was out of patience. His men bound Lizabeta’s wrists and her ankles and placed the ropes over the bridles of four strong horses. Again, he asked Lizabeta how she had stopped the soldiers.

“Only the bees know,” she whispered. For she hadn’t any idea how she’d done it or what miracle had transpired.

The general waited, certain that the girl’s father or the merchant or the wise men of the village would come to her aid and tell him their secrets.

“Do not bother waiting,” she said. “No one is coming.”

So the general gave the order, as generals do, and Lizabeta’s body was torn apart, and the bees hummed lazily in their hives. It’s said her blood watered the roses of the field and turned the blossoms red. It’s said the blooms planted on her grave never perished and smelled sweet the whole year round, even when the winter snows came. But the bees have long since left those hives and want no business with those flowers.

If you can find that meadow, you may stand and breathe in the perfume of its blossoms, speak your prayers, and let the wind carry them west to the sea.

The roses remember, even if wise men choose to forget.

Lizabeta is known as the patron saint of gardeners.