



The Stone People

Who were the stone people? Where had they come from? Would they ever leave? We all had questions, the day they arrived, stomping over the distant hills, their porcelain joints scraping and grinding.

I remember I was doing nothing more interesting than eating a breakfast of marmalade on toast when the news broke on the wireless. The scratchy, broken voice of the anchor somehow seemed suddenly louder than before. The chilling news of our impending invasion, an unwelcome intrusion into my morning routine.

At the time, I wasn't scared. I was barely 10 and full of the invincibility that comes naturally at that age. These seemed like nothing more than a grand adventure waiting to be had. Nevertheless, I remember listening intently, my ear pressed against the warm gauze of the speaker. My older brother tried to wrestle me away, but our mother hushed him into silence.

"Here at Station 42, it is our understanding that these rocky rebels currently pose no threat to us. We estimate that there are two dozen in total and that they will be within the town inside an hour."

The rest of the show was to be filled with so-called "experts" discussing whether this was a political attack, and so I raced out of the house and grabbed my bike. There was only one place to cycle to, and judging by the tide of other children, all flowing in the same direction, we'd all had the same thought.

Our town sits in a bowl at the foot of tree-lined hills, so we had a perfect view of the summits as we headed out of the town along the main road. We'd been riding for maybe half an hour when we saw the formidable silhouettes crest the hills. Once they were all lined up along the ridge, they stopped, their arms dropped to their sides, and they stood still.

Another ten minutes' ride on our bikes and we were at their feet. They made no movement. Their eyes remained fixed on a point somewhere in the distance. One of the others tried to swing one of

the arms, but it wouldn't budge.

Up close, it was more obvious that they were made from the same reddish clay that we'd used in pottery class. These weren't stone creatures thrown up by the landscape; these were golems, hand-crafted by men centuries ago. I remembered reading about an army of them built in China long ago. These were covered in fine detail, expertly crafted. But there were signs of wear. Cracks had formed on the surface, giving each one a unique network of scars. Moss and lichen had started to take hold in crevices.

We played on the golems for hours that day, until eventually, one by one, we were dragged home by our parents. We went back the next day, and the day after that, to see if they would move. But they never did.

I'm an old man now. I've travelled the world many times and seen many strange things. Every time I return, I come back to this town. In all my years, I've yet to witness anything as mysterious as the day the stone people came. And in all that time, I've yet to see them move.

They just stand watching, guarding over us. Against what? We'll never know.

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. How old was the author at the time?
2. How many stone people are there?
3. How long does the news reporter think it will be before they are inside the town?
4. Where had the author read about similar golems being built?
5. What gave the impression of scars on the golems?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

- | | |
|----------|--|
| I | How does the author feel about the experts called in to discuss the matter? How do you know? |
| V | What does the word "formidable" tell you about their first impression of the stone people? |
| S | What do we know about the age of the golems? How does the author give us this information? |
| S | Why was it handy that the town was in a bowl at the foot of the hills? |
| P | What would you do if an army of stone people turned up outside your village? What would you have the council do? |