

Ladders

Raised by the wolves press

7/7/2026

There was once a traveler called C who arrived in a city where the houses breathed and every wall remembered those who had slept against it. He carried almost nothing except a polished smile and a pocket full of tiny mirrors. Whenever he met someone, he would hold up a mirror that reflected not himself, but the other person exactly as they wished to be seen. People mistook this reflection for friendship.

The narrator met him beneath a house where long tables fed strangers, and music echoed through cracked windows. C wore the emblem of an old constellation, and the two spoke until dawn. The traveler seemed harmless then—a curious apprentice wandering through a city built from occupations, abandoned workshops, communal kitchens, broken printing presses and impossible dreams. The narrator had no fixed home. He drifted from couch to couch while carrying heavy bundles of ideas, arguments and unfinished projects. Eventually he found refuge inside an abandoned workshop where forgotten machines still whispered ink into the darkness.

Around it, a collective slowly formed, not through plans but through countless meals, endless meetings, victories that looked like failures and failures that still felt worth celebrating. C began appearing more and more often. At first he came as a visitor. Then as a helper. Then as if he had always belonged there. He worked tirelessly. He carried wood, washed dishes, attended meetings, laughed louder than anyone else. His effort was genuine enough that people welcomed him. Yet every gesture seemed secretly measured against an invisible staircase no one else could see. Others built rooms. C counted floors. The narrator never understood this staircase. Every time he looked where C was staring he saw only empty air. There were kitchens to clean, banners to paint, rent to resist, police to evade, people to care for. Yet C insisted there were steps ascending through the movement itself, hidden among conversations, friendships and reputations. Every person became another rung. Every gathering another landing. Every introduction another elevation. He learned quickly that affection could be harvested.

Compliments became climbing hooks. Shared secrets became ropes. Familiar names became passwords opening doors into circles that had once been closed. When old companions stopped leading upward, they slowly faded behind him like villages disappearing beneath fog. The workshop became a fortress against demolition. Together they organized meals, benefits and nights where music dissolved into debates until sunrise. Chemicals blurred the edges of memory. Ridiculous songs filled the rooms with obscene choruses that everyone mocked because they were too absurd to be taken seriously. Laughter floated through the building like smoke. The narrator

believed jokes vanished with dawn. But C collected echoes. Not because they mattered then. Because every echo might someday become another step.

Years passed. The workshop fell. The collective cracked open under pressure, exhaustion and history. Many searched for new ground. C searched for the next staircase. He crossed mountains into distant lands where old certainties burned away. When he returned, his vocabulary had changed. His clothes had changed. His politics had sharpened. His convictions sounded deeper. But beneath every transformation, the invisible ladder remained exactly where it had always been. Only now the higher floors were occupied by different people. He climbed toward them with the same careful feet. Old comrades became stories. Old shelters became forgotten stations. Old debts dissolved like rainwater. Those who had once offered him a couch became names spoken only when useful. Those who opened doors found themselves standing outside them.

The narrator watched all this without surprise. He had seen many people mistake movements for mountains, believing liberation existed somewhere above instead of beside them. Years drifted by again. Then one summer the traveler returned carrying something stranger than mirrors. He carried seeds. Small, dark seeds gathered from conversations long buried beneath dust. He planted them carefully inside other people's ears. Some sprouted into suspicion. Some into certainty. Some into memories that no longer belonged to those who remembered them. One seed grew from an old joke uttered in a room clouded by intoxication, years before anyone imagined it could survive outside that night. The words had long ago died in the narrator's memory, dissolved among hundreds of equally foolish conversations. But C had preserved the shell. Not the laughter. Not the context. Only the shape. Years later he held the empty shell before others as though it had always been an egg containing a monster. The narrator wondered why no one had spoken when the words were fresh enough to examine. Why they had not been questioned that night, or the following week, or the following year. Instead they had travelled underground like roots, only breaking the surface when the season became convenient.

Then the narrator finally understood the staircase. It had never been made from wood or stone. Each rung was carved from abandoned friendships. Each step was cemented with borrowed trust. Each landing was built from carefully arranged misunderstandings. The higher C climbed, the lighter he became, because every ascent required leaving another piece of someone else beneath his feet. Far above, hidden inside clouds of admiration, the staircase appeared endless. But every invisible ladder has the same flaw. It exists only while enough people continue believing it is there.

The city, however, remembered differently. Its walls still whispered the names of those who built without climbing. Those who stayed. Those who argued face to face instead of through echoes. Those who carried each other instead of standing upon each other. And long after the invisible ladder disappeared into mist, the city remained where it had always been, resting not upon ambition, but upon the countless hands that never sought to rise above one another. There was one thing the Ladder never revealed to its climbers. It had no summit. Above every rung waited another face to impress, another ally to replace, another history to rewrite. The higher C climbed, the less weight he carried, until he discovered he had shed not only old companions but every witness who had ever known him before the performance began. One evening he looked down, expecting to see followers. Instead he saw only thousands of abandoned masks staring back with his own eyes. Then the Ladder quietly withdrew its lowest rung. For the first time he understood that he had never been climbing at all.

He had been hanging over an endless void, supported only by the belief of others—and belief, unlike stone, always learns to let go.

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Set inside an anarchist underworld slowly infected by invisible hierarchies, this nightmare follows a man who mistakes every human connection for another rung. The higher he climbs, the less remains of the people below—until only the Ladder remembers who he used to be.

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