

From Invisibility to Disappearance: Body, Freedom, and Female Escape in Ling Ma's "G"

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Abstract

This article examines Ling Ma's short story "G" from *Bliss Montage* by focusing on invisibility as a literary device through which female bodily freedom, friendship, and self-erasure are simultaneously imagined. In the story, G is a drug that makes its users invisible. At first, invisibility appears as a fantasy of bodily release: the narrator feels light, unburdened, and temporarily free from the visual discipline attached to femininity. Yet the story gradually complicates this fantasy. The ritual of taking G requires the removal of makeup, clothing, and personal objects, revealing how the female body is normally organized through visibility, surfaces, and social evaluation. As the narrator and Bonnie move through restaurants, streets, stores, and Central Park, invisibility allows them to disturb consumer spaces and ordinary social order, but it also produces anxiety about disconnection and disappearance. Their need to hold hands shows that the invisible body still requires relational anchoring. The final movement from "gravity" to "ghost" transforms G from a tool of escape into a sign of self-erasure. Through close reading informed by feminist theories of the body and visibility, this article argues that "G" presents invisibility as an ambivalent condition: it grants a temporary freedom from being seen, but also exposes the risk of becoming socially, physically, and affectively ungraspable.

Keywords: Ling Ma, *Bliss Montage*, G, invisibility, female body, self-erasure.

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INTRODUCTION

Ling Ma's *Bliss Montage* is a short story collection in which ordinary scenes of contemporary life are repeatedly crossed by speculative or surreal premises. The collection's stories move between domestic routine, friendship, migration, desire, violence, and bodily estrangement, often making the fantastic appear almost casual. Reviewers have noted the collection's mixture of the strange and the everyday, its use of fantastical devices, and its attention to intimacy, loneliness, and possession (Hu, 2022; Sears, 2023). Within this collection, "G" is one of the clearest examples of Ma's method. The story is built around a drug that makes people invisible. On the surface, such a premise might suggest comic fantasy or science-fictional escape. Yet the text treats invisibility less as a superpower than as a bodily, social, and emotional experiment.

The story centers on the narrator's final night in New York, when she visits her longtime friend Bonnie

before leaving the city. Bonnie gives her G as a farewell gift. The drug is associated with the narrator's college years, with early-2000s East Coast campus culture, and with a shared history of friendship, experimentation, and dependence. Once the women take G, their bodies begin to vanish from sight. They remove makeup, clothing, and personal objects, enter the city as invisible bodies, disturb public and commercial spaces, return to memories of adolescence and college, and eventually confront the fact that the narrator has been given too high a dose. What initially appears as lightness and freedom gradually becomes a crisis of embodiment. The narrator can feel water pass through her body without being able to retain it; Bonnie's hands pass through her when Bonnie tries to locate her. Invisibility becomes not simply the absence of visibility, but the loss of bodily graspability.

This article argues that "G" uses invisibility to expose a central contradiction in female escape. On one hand, the invisible body seems to be free from the visual demands placed upon women: beauty, thinness, surface,

facial expression, and social legibility. On the other hand, complete escape from visibility also threatens the narrator with self-erasure. To be unseen is not automatically to be free; it may also mean losing contact with other people, with one's own body, and with the world that confirms one's existence. The story therefore transforms invisibility from a fantasy of release into a meditation on embodiment, friendship, and disappearance.

This reading is informed by feminist theories of the body and visibility. Foucault's discussion of disciplinary power helps explain how the body becomes an object of regulation and self-monitoring (Foucault, 1977). Bartky's feminist revision of disciplinary power shows that femininity is often produced through dispersed, everyday practices that train women to regulate posture, appearance, movement, and bodily size (Bartky, 1990). Bordo similarly argues that the female body is a cultural surface on which norms of femininity are inscribed (Bordo, 1993). Mulvey's account of visual pleasure and the gendered gaze remain useful for thinking about how female bodies become objects of looking (Mulvey, 1975). Butler's theory of gender performativity further suggests that identity is not a stable essence but is repeatedly produced through social acts and bodily signs (Butler, 1990). Finally, Ahmed's work on orientation and embodiment helps illuminate how bodies find their way through spaces and relations (Ahmed, 2006), while Gordon's account of haunting provides a language for the story's final movement from invisibility toward ghostliness (Gordon, 1997).

The novelty of this article lies in its focus on "G" as a sustained literary treatment of invisibility. Rather than treating the drug as a simple speculative device, this article reads it as a form that organizes the story's reflections on female selfhood. The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, it examines the procedural style of the G-taking ritual and the medicalized language through which invisibility is made ordinary. Second, it analyzes invisibility as a fantasy of bodily freedom and release from feminine surveillance. Third, it considers the narrator and Bonnie's movement through urban consumer spaces, where invisibility enables both play and disorder. Finally, it discusses touch, friendship, dosage, and ghostliness as signs that freedom from visibility can become a dangerous loss of embodiment.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary material of this article is Ling Ma's short story "G," collected in *Bliss Montage* (Ma, 2022). Because this is a literary study rather than an experimental or statistical study, the method used is qualitative textual analysis. The article performs a close reading of key narrative elements in "G," including the drug-taking instructions, the bodily preparations before invisibility, the narrator's reflections on dieting and self-image, the two women's invisible movement through New York, the motif of hand-holding, the "Astral Plane"

rock in Central Park, and the story's final distinction between gravity and ghostliness.

The method combines textual close reading with selected concepts from feminist theory and body studies. The analysis does not assume that Ma directly or consciously applies any single theoretical model. Instead, feminist theory is used as an interpretive framework for clarifying how the story's images of invisibility, bodily discipline, and disappearance produce meaning. This approach is appropriate for a story whose speculative premise is inseparable from questions of gendered visibility, body image, friendship, and social orientation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Procedural Form of Invisibility

One of the striking features of "G" is that the fantastic premise is presented through a practical, almost instructional form. The story does not simply announce that the narrator and Bonnie become invisible. Instead, it explains how G is to be taken: dosage must be determined, the pill should be swallowed with water, and the body must be prepared before the effect fully begins. The narrative even refers to BMI, dosage, slow absorption, and the timing of the drug's effect. This procedural style makes the impossible appear administratively ordinary. Invisibility is not introduced as magic but as a regulated bodily practice.

This form matters because it connects the fantastic with everyday regimes of bodily management. The language of dose, weight, preparation, and effect resembles medical instruction, pharmaceutical culture, and beauty routines. By giving invisibility a user's manual, Ma suggests that escape itself can become a procedure. The narrator and Bonnie do not transcend the world through pure imagination; they follow steps. Their disappearance is technical, timed, and dependent on bodily measurements. The fantastic is therefore not outside modern discipline. It is organized through the same kind of attention to body data, surface, timing, and control that structures ordinary life.

The preparation process reinforces this point. Before invisibility becomes effective, the women remove makeup, clothing, jewelry, contact lenses, hairpins, and other personal items. The story insists that the face is often forgotten but can still reveal everything. This detail shows that visibility is not simply a biological condition; it is also produced by cosmetics, accessories, clothing, and other surfaces through which social identity is recognized. The invisible body must be stripped of signs. To disappear, one must first remove the cultural markers through which the body usually becomes readable.

Invisibility as Bodily Release

At the beginning of the story, the narrator describes G in terms of floating, lightness, and reduced

gravity. The invisible body seems no longer fully attached to the world. It is not completely absent, but it is also not fully bound by the ordinary weight of embodiment. This sensation gives the story its first image of freedom. To become invisible is to become less available to the social world. The narrator can move without being captured by other people's eyes. The body becomes less accountable to surfaces, mirrors, and visual judgment.

For the narrator, this freedom is especially connected to self-image. She recalls having taken so much G that her adult self-conception formed without a stable visual reference to herself. The remark is paradoxical. Self-knowledge is usually imagined as involving recognition: one sees oneself in the mirror and forms an image of the self. In "G," however, the absence of self-image becomes a kind of alternative freedom. Without a reflected body, the narrator is released from certain forms of judgment. She does not have to confront the visible body as an object to be improved, compared, or corrected.

The story's attention to Bonnie's attraction to the so-called G diet intensifies this feminist critique. Bonnie is drawn to the drug partly because its side effects, including nausea and diarrhea, produce weight loss. The connection between invisibility and dieting is crucial. G does not merely remove the body from sight; it participates in a culture that already encourages women to reduce the body, discipline the body, and make it smaller. Bordo's analysis of the female body as a cultural site of regulation helps clarify this aspect of the story (Bordo, 1993). The G diet literalizes an ordinary cultural logic: the female body is expected to become less excessive, less heavy, less visible. In this sense, invisibility is not simply rebellion against feminine norms. It also dangerously extends them.

The narrator's memory of her mother further situates bodily visibility within intergenerational discipline. She remembers her mother's attention to clothing, makeup, diet, facial shape, and weight. Her mother's gaze becomes a force that can undo messages of body positivity and self-acceptance. The narrator's teenage rebellion against this gaze involves hair, tattoos, clothing, and weight gain - practices that alter the body's surface in order to resist an inherited ideal of femininity. Bartky's account of femininity as an internalized discipline is relevant here because the story shows that patriarchal and gendered power is not always imposed by men alone; it can be transmitted through intimate relations, including mother-daughter relations (Bartky, 1990). The narrator's desire for invisibility therefore grows from a history of being made visible in the wrong way.

Invisible Women in Urban Consumer Space

Once the narrator and Bonnie become invisible, the story shifts from domestic preparation to urban

movement. They move through restaurants, streets, stores, and Central Park. Their invisibility allows them to interfere with public order: they knock glasses from tables, disturb meals, touch strangers, interrupt conversations, throw clothing from chain stores, and spray perfume testers in Sephora until the air becomes overwhelming. These acts are comic and minor, but they are not meaningless. They show invisible women disrupting spaces that usually discipline bodies through consumption, politeness, and display.

Consumer space is especially important in this section. Stores such as Urban Outfitters and Sephora are built around visible surfaces: clothes, fragrance, brand identity, and self-styling. Invisible women have no surface to sell, display, or evaluate. Yet they can still act upon the space. Their bodies cannot be easily seen, but their effects can be felt through broken bottles, moving objects, spilled water, and disturbed customers. In this way, Ma reverses the usual relationship between women and consumer culture. Women are often made visible as consumers and as objects of visual evaluation. In "G," however, the women become invisible agents who make consumer space unstable.

This is not pure liberation. Their actions also reveal boredom, aggression, and a desire to test the boundary between play and harm. The women's invisible pranks range from mischievous to invasive: they follow people home, enter elevators and apartments, and disturb strangers' realities. The story therefore refuses to idealize invisibility as ethical freedom. If visibility makes the female body available to judgment, invisibility makes other people vulnerable to unseen intrusion. The text keeps both sides in view. Escape from surveillance can become the power to surveil others. Freedom from being looked at can become the ability to look and act without accountability.

Ahmed's concept of orientation helps explain this urban movement. Bodies are oriented in space through paths, habits, objects, and relations (Ahmed, 2006). In "G," invisibility disorients the narrator and Bonnie. They can take paths unavailable to visible bodies, but their altered orientation also makes them unstable. Their movement through the city is thrilling because the world seems to yield to them, but it is also precarious because ordinary cues of social location no longer fully apply. They are inside the city and outside its rules at the same time.

Friendship, Touch, and the Need for Reality

The relationship between the narrator and Bonnie is at the emotional center of "G." The drug is not taken alone; it belongs to a shared history. Bonnie's apartment contains memories of college life, early morning conversations, music, dance, emotional care, and mutual dependence. The narrator visits Bonnie on the last night before leaving New York, so the return to G is also a return to an earlier version of their friendship.

Bonnie presents the drug as a nostalgic gift, a chance to recreate a vanished intimacy.

Yet invisibility also reveals the fragility of that intimacy. When two people are invisible together, they need some way to know where the other person is. The story notes that holding hands is a good idea because it allows each person to locate the other and binds them to reality. This detail is one of the most important in the story. Touch becomes more reliable than sight. Friendship is not represented as emotional harmony but as a bodily anchor. The invisible self requires another body to remain oriented. Without touch, invisibility risks becoming isolation.

The hand-holding motif complicates the story's fantasy of freedom. If invisibility means release from being seen, it also means dependence on other forms of contact. The narrator needs Bonnie's hand not simply for safety but for confirmation that she still occupies a shared world. In this sense, the story suggests that identity is relational. The self is not sustained by visual self-possession alone; it is also sustained by being found, touched, and remembered by others. Butler's account of identity as repeated and socially produced helps clarify why the narrator's loss of visible form becomes so threatening (Butler, 1990). Without the social signs that ordinarily stabilize identity, the narrator requires relational recognition all the more.

Bonnie's role, however, is deeply ambivalent. She gives the narrator G as a gift, but she also gives her too much. When the narrator later realizes that Bonnie's face shows guilt, she understands that the excessive dosage was intentional, even if Bonnie regrets it. The farewell gift becomes an act of attachment and aggression. Bonnie seems to want to keep the narrator in New York, or at least to make leaving impossible for one night. The drug that once joined them now exposes the possessive side of friendship. Invisibility reveals not only freedom from the social gaze, but also the difficulty of separating from someone whose love is mixed with control.

From Gravity to Ghost: The Anxiety of Disappearance

The story's final conceptual movement occurs through the two possible meanings of G. One explanation is that G stands for gravity, referring to the heaviness felt when the drug wears off and the body returns like a sinking stone. Another explanation is that G stands for ghost. According to the former drug dealer Liesel, taking too much G can make a person permanently ghostly; beyond invisibility lies disappearance. The movement from gravity to ghost changes the story's meaning. Invisibility first seems to free the body from weight, but the end of the story suggests that weight may also be what keeps the body in the world.

This reversal is central to Ma's treatment of escape. At the beginning, gravity feels like a burden. The narrator wants lightness, floating, and release. By the end, however, the loss of gravity becomes terrifying. The narrator cannot drink water because it passes through her. Bonnie's hands pass through her body. She may be crying, but she cannot feel tears. These details make disappearance physical rather than abstract. The invisible body is no longer a playful body without social consequences; it is a body that cannot hold matter, cannot receive touch, and cannot fully register its own sensations.

Gordon's theory of haunting is useful here because the ghost is not simply someone who is absent. A ghost is an unresolved presence, a sign that something lost continues to matter (Gordon, 1997). In "G," the possibility of becoming a ghost is frightening because it means the narrator may remain present only as a trace. Liesel, the dealer who warned her, has herself become almost forgotten after graduation. The narrator remembers her name, but others do not. This detail connects ghostliness with social memory. To become a ghost is not just to lose one's body; it is to risk losing one's place in the memory of others.

The ghost motif also redefines the story's feminist problem. If the visible female body is burdened by judgment, then invisibility seems desirable. But if invisibility becomes ghostliness, the solution reproduces another harm: social erasure. The story does not choose between visibility and invisibility. Instead, it shows that both conditions are dangerous when they are structured by power. Visibility exposes the female body to regulation, objectification, and comparison. Invisibility removes the body from those forms of judgment, but it may also remove the subject from relation, accountability, memory, and care.

This is why the story's last crisis is not merely a bad drug experience. It is the logical endpoint of the fantasy of not being seen. The narrator's panic - her sense that she can no longer feel herself - reveals that embodiment is not only a burden. It is also a condition of contact. To have weight, surface, and visibility is to be vulnerable to judgment; but it is also to be locatable, touchable, and able to act in the world. "G" therefore transforms a fantasy of escape into a more difficult recognition: one cannot simply solve the problem of gendered visibility by disappearing.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Ling Ma's "G" presents invisibility as an ambivalent literary device through which female bodily freedom and self-erasure are explored together. The story begins by making invisibility attractive: it brings lightness, floating, and release from the burdens of visible embodiment. The narrator's history of body discipline, maternal scrutiny, and self-image makes this release especially meaningful.

In a world where the female body is repeatedly measured, displayed, corrected, and judged, the fantasy of not being seen appears as a form of freedom.

Yet the story refuses to leave invisibility as a simple metaphor for liberation. The procedural preparation for G reveals that disappearance is itself organized through regimes of bodily control. The G diet links invisibility to weight loss and bodily reduction. The invisible movement through urban space allows playful disturbance but also raises ethical questions about intrusion and accountability. The relationship between the narrator and Bonnie shows that invisibility intensifies the need for touch and relational anchoring. Finally, the movement from gravity to ghost exposes the deepest danger of the fantasy: to escape visibility completely may be to lose the body's capacity for contact, sensation, and social remembrance.

The most important finding of this article is that "G" does not simply oppose visibility and invisibility. Instead, it treats both as unstable conditions. Visibility can be disciplinary, but invisibility can become erasure. The female subject in Ma's story seeks relief from being seen, yet she also needs to remain graspable by herself and by others. Through the speculative device of G, Ma makes visible a paradox of contemporary female selfhood: the desire to escape the gaze is inseparable from the fear of disappearing altogether.

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