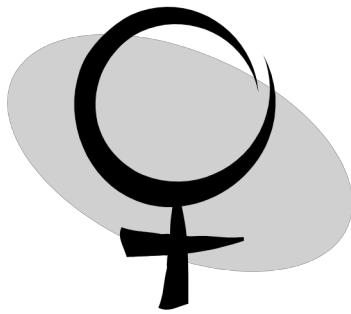


Momnesia

A NOVEL



LORI VERNI-FOGARSI

FOR EVERYONE WHO HAS EVER...

Been a mother, had a mother, wanted to be a mother,
judged a mother, or even just wondered about mothers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I arrive at the goal of publishing this book, there are so many people I think of gratefully; who influenced the development of the story, and/or were supportive throughout the research and writing process.

However, although a fictional story, none of the perspectives shared throughout *Momnesia* could have been developed without my adventures in parenting. And so I dedicate this book to my children, Diana and Julia.

They're funny, they're smart, they're loving, and fortunately, are rarely grueling. They are each individuals and they treat me as an individual. We each grow together in our own child or adult ways, every day.

And for that, I am "j'appreciative." With a capital "jai."

ABOUT THE COVER ART

As an author, the cover art for *Momnesia* is very important to me. While we all know that you should never judge a book by its cover, the fact is that when you first see a book, you have no other option.

When I came up with the concept and decided to commission an artist to create it for me, there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to work with Michelle M. McElroy of Visual Artistry. Having had the opportunity to experience her work in various medium, I knew that her style of realism with an artistic flair would be perfect for this project.

Working with her turned out to be a great decision, as I feel the cover art epitomizes the concept I was trying to impart.

To learn more about Michelle's work and Visual Artistry, I encourage you to visit www.mmmartistry.com.

(If you are reading this as a sample chapter, please see the cover art at LoriVerniFogarsi.com, BrickstonePublishing.com, or your book retailer. Don't miss out... it's really great!)

Part I

The End



One

I was in my car in the parking lot of the supermarket. That I was certain about. What I was not sure about was... well, everything else.

For example, did I just come into the car with the groceries or had I yet to go into the store? Should I get divorced? (The question I'd been pining about for more than two years.) Or continue along in my unhappy marriage?

You know that your life has become far too miserable when you can't even recall what you're doing versus what you've already done. As I sat there watching shoppers going in and out of the store, shepherding children and loading up their cars, I told myself, *This is ridiculous! Of course I can remember. Just think!*

I recalled waking the kids—a task no easier on camp mornings than on school days. Cleaning the waffle iron—the direct result of my guilt over their customary cereal. Walking them to the neighbor's, thankful that it wasn't my turn to drive, the syrupy air dotted with mosquitoes almost as irritating as the girls' litany of complaints (the counselors are mean, they don't like the pizza). The sour taste of resentment at having to do everything while Paul, apparently having an "up" day, would saunter by and do things like tickle them—always ready to usurp but never to help.

I'd returned home, showered and dressed, then gathered my things.

Turning toward the passenger seat, my errand supplies were still there: the bank deposit, some library books, and a proposal to drop off at a client's showroom. Somewhat relieved, I recalled carrying those things to the car. Walking out to my driveway, the heat had been wriggling up from the pavement in a mirage of waves. I'd opened the car door and the scalding interior air had slapped me, causing my teeth to throb as if I'd bitten into an ice cream.

That's it. That was all I could remember. I had no recollection of driving to the store or parking the car, both of which I had obviously done. With rising panic, I tried to convince myself that it was one of those situations where it's such a familiar task that your car simply "knows" the way.

On the other hand, to have absolutely no idea of whether or not I'd gone *into* the store was so farfetched that the misery I carried with me became oppressively apparent as far more than a preoccupation. Clearly, my indecisiveness about my marriage had intensified to a debilitating level.

Look at what I've become. This can't go on any longer.

An understanding hovered just outside my reach—like when a word is on the tip of your tongue but you can't get it to come out. I blinked, nauseous, tiny black spots zigzagging like sperm in my periphery.

Digging through my purse, I pulled out a cigarette and lit it, exhaling a plume of smoke just in time to notice two PTA acquaintances walking by, averting their eyes and talking behind their hands. *Greeaat.*

I cracked the window and chills rippled over me, causing goose bumps to rise along my arms. Which I'm sure would have been an alarming sensation at any time, but on that day held even more weight being that I was, thankfully, still cognizant enough to realize that it was a sweltering August day in North Carolina and that the temperature had to be over one hundred degrees.

As if on autopilot, my arm reached out to hit a button and a rush of cool air blasted onto my neck where the perspiration was streaming down and pooling along my collarbone.

My anxiety continued to rise, knowing that I had to turn around and see if there were bags in the back of the car, but feeling paralyzed, unable to turn my head. Postponing the inevitable, I contemplated the little vehicle that steers twenty shopping carts—or more specifically, the teenager whose machismo expression failed to fully conceal his grin as he drove it. *Why are we so afraid to let our real selves be seen?*

Images began flashing through my mind like one of those slideshows presented at the end of kindergarten year, filled with heart-pulling images: Paul doing a lemonade stand with the kids, their giggles shining brighter than their lime-green and turquoise pitchers. Rusty bringing his Frisbee to me, his hopeful brown eyes filled with unconditional canine adoration.

Who will keep the cats? Can I deal with cutting the lawn? Did I go in the damn store? This is fucking crazy!

Finally, impatient with the situation—and in fact, my entire life—I forced myself to look.

They were there. The groceries. And to make matters worse, it was obvious this had been no small shopping trip either. There were about nine bags, which to my practiced eye amounted to around \$127. worth of food shopping.

Returning to forward-facing, my eyes skimmed past the rest of the interior: two booster seats in the back and miscellaneous litter that included crumpled napkins, empty juice boxes, and a Wiggles CD. Absurdly, I thought, *This place is a pigsty. I've really got to clean that up.*

Another emotion washed over me: relief. And I don't mean relief from the heat, the dissipating shock, or even the fact that I could check the grocery shopping off of my to-do list. No, this was an all-consuming relief, like when it's Christmas night and your kids are happy, everyone's been fed, and the annual holiday slavery is behind you.

I was relieved because it was over. My "Should I? Shouldn't I? Dilemma" had finally come to an end. There was no further question, nothing else to pine over. Without the tiniest smidgen of doubt, it was time to get divorced.

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I realize that, although serious, this one incident might sound like a frivolous way to make such a critical decision. But the truth is, it wasn't so much the one incident as much as it was the *final* incident—the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, breaking me out of the cognitive dissonance that had gone on for so long regarding my marriage. And besides, I think anyone would agree that when you find yourself so emotionally disoriented that you entirely lose large chunks of time out of your life, things have gone way too far.

Not to mention my conversation just a week earlier with my gynecologist during which she asked, "So, I see that you're physically healthy. And how are *you* doing?" While I did not pour my heart out with all the details of my unhappy marriage, I did end up disclosing enough information about my current state of unhappiness for her to suggest, "I can prescribe something that will make you feel a whole lot better. Many women at your stage of life are taking antidepressants."

This threw me back to a memory from about twelve years prior when my friend Faith, (who is twenty-five years older) told me, "Wait and see. Once you have kids and get to be around forty you'll be taking Buspar just like the rest of us." We were sitting around a campfire, passing a bottle of cherry brandy amongst a group of women that included her sister, best friend, mother, and cousin. All of whom were nodding enthusiastically and agreeing, "Yup, it's the best. A real life saver!"

I remember thinking at the time that those women were crazy. And I didn't mean crazy in the sense of actually being a person with a mental disorder that requires medication. I meant crazy metaphorically, as in how could it be possible that *all* of them were so miserable that they have resorted to medicating themselves just to get through life?

Back then, I was thinking that they needed therapy, not drugs. And that day, sitting in my car in the parking lot of the supermarket, I realized that what I needed was also not a prescription, but a divorce. And maybe some therapy too.

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Heading home, knowing I'd be telling Paul that "this was it," I dreaded the discussion. Honestly, not so much because he'd be distraught. He doesn't get distraught. (Except for when he does.) Selfishly, I was dreading it because I knew he would act shocked and that it was going to drive me crazy.

After all, how could he be shocked when all I'd been talking about with him for more than two years was the fact that we were unhappy and I thought we should consider a divorce? I'd spoken to him about it in person, on the phone, in writing, and via e-mail. We went to marriage counseling for a year. We did the date night thing, the creative conversations, the discussing with mutual friends. We tried all the things people try when they don't want to tear apart their family and ruin the lives of their two young daughters.

Nonetheless, I knew he'd be shocked. And the reason I knew that was because after ten years of marriage, I knew that he was surprised about almost everything.

For example, "Oh, we're leaving now?" he'd cry, dismayed that it was time to leave despite the fact that I'd been running around for the previous three hours, bathing two children, getting them dressed, packing their snacks, walking the dog, hollering for everyone to get coats on, warming up the car, and making sure the business answering machine was set. "I didn't know we were leaving," he'd grumble, as he'd head into the bathroom for a nice long one while the kids and I would sit in the car and wait.

I also knew that he'd be shocked because he didn't really think anything was wrong in the first place. Of course, he knew *I* was unhappy. But the reality is, he could have continued in the marriage—with all of its dysfunctional idiosyncrasies—forever. Pleasantly cohabiting like roommates with me facilitating every aspect of his and the children's lives, running our family business, and taking care of every detail, while he would simply come and go to and from work and cut the grass once a week. Well, that's not entirely true: sometimes he wouldn't even cut the grass because he "wasn't feeling up to it," while other times he'd compulsively implement household projects—projects which inevitably became my responsibility when he'd lose steam.

You're probably thinking this sounds bitter on my part. However, I really don't think it should be described as bitterness so much as disgust: with myself for having let it go on for so long, with him for not being different than he was, and with both of us for making such a poor choice of spouse in the first place.



Two

When I first met Paul I was twenty-four years old and a full-fledged, all American, single-as-they-come New York girl. I was self-employed, always flush with cash, and enjoyed the unconventional aspect of being a woman who owns a commercial floor cleaning company.

At just over five feet tall, with long curly hair and a very small frame, I often found myself entertained by people's reactions when I was out marketing my business or bidding on a job. Most would take one look at me and expect me to own a jewelry-making business or perhaps that I would stencil bunnies onto the walls of children's nurseries. "Commercial floor cleaner" was certainly not a description that would come to mind when meeting me.

Nonetheless, I'd built a strong reputation for Flawless Floors, with a large client base that kept me perpetually busy, and it was all I could do to keep up with the business and a very active social life.

But I was tired. Oh so tired of doing everything myself. (And no, the irony of winding up doing everything myself in the end has not escaped me, thanks.) So when I met Paul and he was such a nice guy, looking to settle down, wanting children, interested in my business, and eager to help out, I jumped onboard. He was thirty-four, divorced with no children (and therefore no obligation to his former wife), good-looking, and very nice.

Yes, if I had to describe Paul in one word, it would be "nice." I would say it then and I still say it now because it's true. Our need to get divorced was not based on lack of niceness. We didn't fight, we didn't scream. We didn't cheat on one another (at least I don't think he did and I know I didn't). In fact, we didn't do any of the abominable things most people do in the years preceding a divorce.

We simply *didn't*. Meaning, we really didn't do *anything*. Not only did we not do the bad things, but we didn't do the good things either. We didn't talk, didn't make joint decisions, didn't have sex—well, very rarely. We didn't discipline the children together, didn't laugh, didn't hold hands. We just didn't. We just weren't. There was no "us," but rather "he" and "I," each living our lives in a parallel way, doing the things that needed to be done, as would coworkers or roommates. It all got even worse as his behavior became more and more strangely erratic—an issue he refused to acknowledge, never mind address.

At the time we met, however, marrying Paul seemed like a good idea. While it was never the captivating kind of love described in romance novels, it was... nice. And I'm sure a part of me—the exhausted, tired-of-doing-everything-myself part of me—felt rescued in a way. No more having to do everything alone. No more time wasted dating guy after guy who was definitely not right for me. This one, while not the stuff of romance novels, was definitely not *not* right for me and I think I just didn't have the energy to search any more.

You might be thinking, Goodness, weren't you only twenty-four? How much searching could you have done? How exhausted could you have been? Why didn't you just take some vitamins? Which are legitimate questions, I must admit.

However, I'd been living independently since the tender age of seventeen. Completely independently, as in having my own apartment, my own bills, my own car—every responsibility my own. I had always worked like a dog, juggling no less than two or three jobs at a time, at first because I had to in order to make ends meet, and then later so I could amass the startup capital for my business.

My persona (as anyone who knows me would attest), would be to act as if it's no big deal and say that you just do what you have to do. But looking back, I realize that it was. A very big deal.

I built my business from scratch, unaided by anyone, financially or otherwise. During the three years before I met Paul, I essentially worked 24/7 to build it up. In the beginning I personally did all of the actual floor cleaning jobs, which involved loading and unloading the equipment, setting up hoses (some of which are so enormous they could likely be used for firefighter training), applying the steam, chemicals and so forth, as well as

handling all of the marketing, bookkeeping, computer work, ordering, invoicing, bidding, and so on. During the third year—the year I met Paul—I hired two assistants: one for the office and one for the job sites. But because I was busier than ever, all they did was allow more work to get done, rather than to emancipate any of my time.

So at the time, whether it seems sensible or not, I was Over-Tired. *Over* the excitement of being out on my own and *Tired* of doing everything myself. And that's how it came to seem like settling down with someone "nice" would be a good idea.

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Paul was shocked. I knew he would be shocked and he was. I knew it would drive me crazy and it did.

As he sat there, looking at me with his "cat face" on, my decision was reaffirmed that much more strongly as being the only viable option.

This situation was the epitome of the differences between us. Our communication styles were diametrically opposite and as we sat in our cramped little office, face-to-face, "discussing" a divorce, those differences couldn't have been more apparent.

I am a decider. Although admittedly, on huge decisions like the divorce I am not necessarily a fast decider. I am also a researcher, and information gatherer, a self-educator—whatever you want to call it. When something needs to be decided, I research and research, gather and gather, self-educate and self-educate, so that when I make my final decision, I know for sure in my heart of hearts that I have made the best possible, most fully informed choice, having taken into account every aspect.

I'm aware that some people find this annoying, and it's highly likely that Paul is one of them. The truth is, I am this way with every decision, big or small. For example, if I'm ordering fried chicken, I like to peruse the options to determine which menu items come with how many pieces of dark meat (my favorite), how many side dishes (must be sure to have enough mashed potatoes for the kids), whether or not a drink is included, etc. Then and only then do I decide what to order.

While a small decision such as ordering chicken certainly does not take me more than the two years of speculation it took me to decide about getting a divorce, I openly admit that it probably does take me a teeny bit longer than most people. But when I have my dinner, I end up eating my dark meat chicken while enjoying the fact that my kids are not whining because they have plenty of mashed potatoes.

Paul, on the other hand, is a "can't decider." Although I realize that he does manage to order chicken when he is alone, I truly can't imagine how, because he has never made such a decision in my presence.

"What are you gonna get?" I'd ask.

"I don't know, what are you gonna get? I'll get that too."

This was the way all decisions were made in our marriage, the divorce being no exception.

Conversations about our relationship were no different. I'd approach him in the hope of elucidating our situation and it would be like talking to a cat. If you've ever had a cat, or even visited with someone else's cat, you will understand what I mean.

When you talk to a cat, he just sits there and looks at you. Perhaps he blinks. You figure that he must hear you since he's sitting just a few feet away and is staring straight at you. However, he doesn't say a word, and doesn't even communicate through hand signals. Instead, he simply sits there and looks at you with his unblinking cat face. This is what's involved with having a conversation with a cat and this is what it was like trying to communicate with Paul.

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"Why do you look so surprised?" I asked.

No response. Cat face.

"In my opinion, we have done everything possible to try and work things out and I just feel it's not working. Do you disagree?"

"I guess not."

"Well do you agree or disagree? You must have some opinion one way or the other."

"Not really."

At that point, even I, who normally never shuts up, couldn't think of a thing to say. What do you say to someone who you've been married to for ten years, have two children with, and own a family business together, when they tell you that they have no opinion one way or the other when you ask for a divorce?

I just sat there and stared back at him, trying to find any evidence as to whether he cared even one iota about what was happening. He was sitting squarely in his chair, facing me with both feet planted on the floor shoulder-width apart. (If his chiropractor is reading this, I'm sure she must be proud.) His jeans, slightly worn at the knees and frayed at their hems, were unmoving: there was no telltale tapping of a foot or bouncing of a knee.

Moving my gaze upward, his waist was almost imperceptibly expanding and contracting, his breathing as calm as the treetops outside the window: seemingly petrified in the stagnant summer air.

His face too showed no indication that there might be any internal struggle. I searched for a clue, *any* clue that it might matter to him that our marriage was coming to an end, but all I found was indifference. His mouth was tranquilly slackened, and his unclouded blue eyes revealed nothing more determinate than his usual noncommittal, even-tempered gaze. Like a crystalline sky, there was no sign of a storm brewing, or even the slightest puff of cumulous emotion. Reflected back at me I found nothing more than a vision of myself. Looking extremely distressed.

My decision that much further reaffirmed, I moved forward with logistics.

"I'm hoping we can stay on good terms and not become one of those couples who treat each other like crap, get the kids stuck in the middle, and rack up thousands of dollars in lawyer bills."

No answer. Cat face.

"I think we should work out all of the details ourselves concerning the kids, dividing our assets and so forth, and then just get one attorney to draw up the papers and both sign them peacefully."

"Okay." Sad cat face.

"Is there anything you want to say *at all*?"

"Not really."

Fuckin' Cat Face!

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The arguing finally stopped. No, not between Paul and I—I already pointed out that he and I didn't argue. It was what I refer to as The Two Little Guys Inside My Head.

They aren't like the typical "devil versus angel" little guys that you're probably visualizing, one sitting on each of my shoulders, either wearing a halo or carrying a pitchfork. Neither one is necessarily the good guy or the bad guy. Rather, they're like two lawyers, each arguing their side of the case whenever there is something to be contemplated. For example:

Little Guy Number One: Maybe we should let her go to the party.

Little Guy Number Two: But she's only eight years old and it's being held until eleven o'clock at night at a pool with no lifeguard!

Little Guy Number One: I know, but she really wants to go and she plays with this girl a lot at school.

Little Guy Number Two: But we don't know the mother. And anyway, what kind of parent plans an eighth birthday party late at night at a pool?

Little Guy Number One: On the other hand, she did say that even though other parents aren't staying, we are welcome to stay if we want to.

Little Guy Number Two: Yeah, right. So we'll be the only parent to stay? Our daughter will hate us!

Little Guy Number One: She'll hate us anyway if we don't let her go.

Little Guy Number Two: Okay, since she'll hate us either way, then let's just have her not go. She'll hate us anyway, but at least she won't drown.

Little Guy Number One: Fine.

Little Guy Number Two: Fine.

Decision made. Argument over. The Two Little Guys shut up.

Despite the ease with which The Two Little Guys arrive at a successful conclusion in the above example, when it came to deciding whether or not to get divorced, it was not so simple. The arguing on this topic had begun

about five years beforehand and continued to increase in intensity, with those last two years consisting of their perpetual disputing of the pros and cons like a continuous reel inside my head.

They expostulated every angle, armed with all of the research, self-education, and information I gathered—continuously debating it over and over, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with never a conclusion reached. At least not until that crucial day in the supermarket parking lot. It was exhausting.

Of course, I do realize that The Two Little Guys Inside My Head are actually me arguing with myself. Regardless, they did get annoying and there were points when I thought I'd go insane from their incessant bickering back and forth, back and forth, never coming to a verdict. At times, I'd actually yell at them in my thoughts (yes, a third one of us getting into the mix). *Enough! Everyone just shut up for a while about this!*

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Once my decision was finally made, my overriding emotion was one of relief.

Although the peace and quiet was nice, the deliverance I received from the Two Little Guys' arguing was only one small aspect of the overall amelioration of my toxic level of stress.

Much more significantly, it was the salvation of myself. Or, more accurately, it was salvation *from* myself. For I worked hard—especially during that final year—trying to save my marriage.

I demanded excellence from within, critiquing every sentence I spoke, analyzing every behavior I made, judging myself against the standards of society as well as questioning my own beliefs. I questioned the person that I was, the person I used to be, and even the person I'd always thought I wanted to become. I was like a malevolent dictator within myself, brutally scrutinizing every aspect of my life, both related and unrelated to Paul.

I researched and confirmed my suspicion that Paul's increasingly erratic behavior was not quite normal, learning more than I'd ever care to know about bipolar disorder—including experiencing firsthand that its sufferers often refuse to acknowledge that any problem exists.

I read books. I went to counseling. I phoned his doctor just prior to his annual physical but was told that they couldn't discuss anything without signed permission from Paul—who adamantly refused to acknowledge that there was anything unusual about doing little more than lying around in your underwear for two weeks, then getting up one day and deciding to rip out the back deck.

Accustomed to being successful in all other areas of my life, I unyieldingly demanded that I keep trying additional techniques and new strategies, inevitably becoming frustrated when every attempt led to yet another disappointment.

No, I don't do well with failure. But this failure had been such a long time coming that the actual occurrence became somewhat of an anomaly. Like the mild stick of a flu shot you've been dreading, anxiously looking away as the nurse swabs your arm with alcohol: the prick of your skin is mitigated by having anticipated it being so much worse. Not to mention the underlying knowledge that it really is better for you anyway.

Yes, relief was my reigning emotion. It had been an exhausting year and the several before it were no picnic either. Yet looking back, I realize that it was necessary... all of the misery, all of the disappointment, and enough frustration to bring me to the edge of insanity. It was necessary—for me—to stick it out to the very end so that when my decision was finally made, I knew in my heart of hearts without the shadow of a doubt that I was doing the right thing.

And if I really have to be honest (and I do, because that's the very essence of who I am), I'll admit that I learned a lot that year. So much that I don't think I'd be nearly the (fantastic!) person I am today if I hadn't gone through it. I guess the old adage still holds true, like my Grandpa Vinny from New York used to say, "If it don't kill ya, it makes ya stronguh."

**Want to read more? Order your copy of *Momnesia!*
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