Zeus, the king of the Olympian gods, married a nymph goddess, Metis, and wound up swallowing her to avoid her ever having a son who might overpower him. From their union came Athena, an Olympian goddess. Then Zeus married a Titan, Themis, and had a number of children who cared about justice and peace and government. Then he married another nymph, Eurynome, a sister to his first wife, and she bore him three daughters with cheeks as round and fresh as apples, called the Graces.

And then Zeus took a fourth wife. Ah, yes, his fourth wife. She was his sister, the goddess Demeter. None of Zeus’ wives were frivolous, yet none were anywhere near as solid as Demeter. Her hair was the rich gold of ripening wheat. Her fragrant shoulder was a welcoming cushion for a baby’s head. All she needed to do was smile and fruit trees blossomed and bore so many sweethees that they bent nearly to the earth with their abundance. All she needed to do was glance lovingly and greens shot up from the loamy soil and spread thick, dark, nourishing leaves. She was the goddess of the bountiful harvest, and the whole world counted on her generosity. She made Zeus feel cared for, safe—like his grandmather Gaia had made him feel. Perhaps Gaia sensed this; perhaps she felt a small tingle of jealousy.

Demeter bore to Zeus a single daughter, Persephone. The girl had thin arms, pearl white. She gave off the scent
of night jasmine. Light played on her face, making her appear as varied and rich with colors as a meadow of flowers. Her ankles were slight, adding grace to agility. Demeter doted on her. How could she not?

Persephone played often with the nymph daughters of Oceanus, for they were all of like mind, laughing, lissome lovelies. One day they gamboled through soft grasses decorated with narcissi, crocuses, violets, irises, hyacinths. And the Olympian god Hades, from the Underworld below, noticed Persephone’s ankles, those trim little things. Those quick little things. There was nothing in Tartarus quite like them. Delicate delicate ankles, spiderwebs glistening with dew in a forest dawn.

Hades was enamored of her. But she was his brother Zeus’ daughter. So he spoke of his love to Zeus, the king who knew next to nothing about a father’s duty. How could he, being the son of Cronus, the great swallower? Zeus left the raising of his many children to his many wives. So Zeus turned to Gaia, Mother Earth, for help. Gaia should have known better than to be lured
in. But maybe that tingle came to her again. Maybe her eyes smarted just a little at the very name of Demeter. Gaia put forth a most radiant flower from the center of her being, a single root with a hundred blossoms whose perfume wafted over the far seas.

Persephone didn’t have a chance. She reached for the treasure and—oh!—the earth opened and Hades grabbed her. Snatched. Gone.

Demeter sped like a wild bird over land and sea, searching. She ate nothing, drank nothing, slept not at all. Her cheeks grew hollow, her body gaunt. Greens turned brown. Fruits withered to dust. Hunger twisted the innards of every living creature. And all this time Zeus simply watched.

But Hecate, the great-granddaughter of two Titans, had pity and told Demeter what had happened. Demeter shrank in upon herself, biting her own fists in rage and frustration. Not until life on Earth was threatened with imminent famine did Zeus finally send his winged son Hermes to fetch the girl.

And so Persephone was returned to Demeter. But Hades had put in her mouth a single pomegranate seed and the winsome girl had swallowed it. Alas. Because she had tasted anything, even this tiny morsel, on her brief and miserable stint in the Underworld, she was obliged to spend a third of every year

Persephone rejoices in the kiss of sunlight as she emerges from Hades to be with Demeter for the next eight months. Snow melts, seeds sprout, and this girl’s heart temporarily heals.
there as Hades' wife. The other two-thirds of the year, she spent with her mother Demeter.

Hence the Earth sprouts and flowers and fruits through spring and summer and autumn, when Demeter and Persephone hold hands in the fields. But the world turns bare and unyielding through winter, when Persephone returns to Hades and bereft Demeter mourns.