In fifth grade, Mahopac, New York, at a school near the lake where I tried to hold my breath underwater for a full two minutes, my favorite teacher, Sister Alexandrine, told my class about a toddler who was watching her mother peel potatoes one day, laughing and pretending to steal peels off the newspaper. When her mother turned her back for a minute, the child popped a peel in her mouth, choked on it and died right there on the kitchen floor.

The nuns of the Divine Compassion, including Alexandrine the sadist, loved us. They were simply protecting us, nuns’ duty—and useful, because my parents were definitely the laissez-faire types, paying little attention when my brother and I ran off for a whole day to sit in an apple tree and eat Macs while we told each other jokes, chewing and laughing our heads off.

Because the Divine Compassions were more preoccupied with death preparedness than the three R’s, I was basically self-taught
until sixth grade. Then we moved to Long Island and had truly cruel nuns, those dark clichés, who tweaked and pinched, ruled and yanked, using fear to teach us. When I was in eighth grade and my brother in seventh, Sister Robert took him down to the boiler room (a mythical place of fire and justice for all of us children) and spanked his bare bottom with her bare hand.

The atrocities didn’t divert me from my persistent daydream, however, my vocation. I completely memorized the four-hundred-page epic of convent options I’d cherished since third grade. Religious Orders of the World. I’d gone through each entry and systematically eliminated the orders that didn’t seem right for me: first, the missionary orders, because I was afraid of earthquakes and tsunamis and believed they only happened in other countries; then the teaching orders—for unconscious, although obvious, personal reasons like Sister Robert.

The nursing orders weren’t for me either. I’d happily agreed to visit my friend Maggie’s grandfather at a home for the aged, walked confidently in the front door, took stock of the sounds and odors, turned around, and walked right back out. Stop reading that nun book, my mother said when I got home and folded into my favorite chair. Get some fresh air!

I tearfully crossed out the unattainable entries, from the Sisters of the Sick Poor to the Bon Secours. It was clear to me that the only thing I was any good at was praying.