

# Life with Angie

by [DC Diamondopolous](#) (April 2025)



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**My sister Angie gives me** outrageous material for my standup comedy. She's a bona fide nut case, a paranoid schizophrenic, bipolar, manic depressive—you name it—Angie fits every disorder that isn't wired to reality.

The voices inside her head tell her to run from anyone trying to help her—except me. I take my sister's sorry existence, find the humor in it—in the loonies of my own mind—and make people laugh. Do I feel guilty? I'm half Jewish, half

Catholic. Humor is my way of coping. Hell, I'm a female stand-up comic, and there's no higher hurdle in show business.

Growing up, bullies at school called me circus girl. I'm 5'10", big-boned, with short blonde hair. I was gay and Jew bashed. I rolled in the hurt, turned it inside out, and now make people laugh. I'm a babyface dykey-looking pansexual, gender fluid, LA Dodger and Laker fan.

There have been days and nights when I've had to search for Angie. I've become an expert on underpasses—the noisiest, the filthiest, with the latest graffiti art. I could be a docent, leading tours. I'd recommend disposable shoes, cheap socks, and a jar of Vicks VapoRub to hold under the nose because the bouquet is out-of-this-world.

When the audience leans forward, I know I have them. They're waiting for the punch line. But I let the tragedy of Angie's existence sink in. Like the time the cops took her into custody after she stole a crossing-guard paddle, and used it to direct traffic on the 134 freeway. Angie caused gridlock for hours. At the mental health facility, she was a model of "rationality" with anger issues that she promised she'd address. She's instinctive that way—knowing when to sane-up.

Truth is, the worry and stress have turned my comedy into a commentary on homelessness and the mentally ill. I've become an observational comedian, like my idol, George Carlin.

My 5:00 p.m. visit to Angie's crib, an appliance box near the Golden State Freeway, is timed before my 7:00 call for *Anything Goes*, and with her reading of the sun's angle, "the *real watch*," she calls it. When I asked her how she could tell time when it's dark, she answered, "When I sleep, there is no time." Angie's mind is a labyrinth, catching words that relate in a flow all her own; "Are you hungry?" "My stomach's vacant." "Are you safe?" "My deposits are empty." I weave that into my stand-up, too.

I visit Angie every afternoon. It's a short ride on Interstate 5 from my apartment in Glendale to the Zoo Drive off-ramp. I'm passing a homeless camp along the Los Angeles Aqueduct. People are visible through the chain-link fence. Outside their tents, they eat dinner from cans and talk to their neighbors. Angie won't live in a tent, and she won't be around people. She's a fugitive, always running from the voices in her head.

She was like the rest of us until a year ago when she turned twenty-five. Her transformation happened gradually, soon after my father's death. I've wondered if that triggered her illness. She'd withdraw, hear voices, tear out clumps of her hair, be ecstatic, then sink into a black hole where no one could reach her, not even me. We're more than sisters. We're best friends. Angie has always been willowy but would stare down anyone who'd make fun of me. I'm three years older and have always taken care of her.

My air-conditioning is on full blast in the bumper-to-bumper traffic. I find humor everywhere. Right now in front of me is a garbage truck. Scrolled across the back in a flowing script are the words, *Nothing Like a Good Dump*. I'll use it tonight when I warm up the audience before the filming of the sitcom, *Anything Goes*. I'm a laughter lube, bringing the audience to the edge of their seats, so they're ready to cheer for the stars. I love my job. The pay sucks but I recently scored a weekend gig at Flappers Comedy Club, and I have a roof over my head that isn't made of cardboard.

I snack on saltines and a smoothie, hoping my ulcer doesn't act up. In the passenger seat is Angie's care package: water, trail mix, granola bars, Lorna Doones (her favorite), toilet paper, five packs of wipes, a clean sweatshirt, and underpants.

I pass the same old billboards. No matter what they advertise, everyone smiles. For once I'd like to see families like mine. I'd like to see some genuine family friction arguing politics

and money, iPhones to the right of their knives, something candid, not canned. Nowadays, if we do eat together—with my father gone, and my sister out to lunch—it's just my mother and me. *"Ronnie, you're head of the family now. It's up to you to look after your sister."* Thanks, Mom. If you took care of your heart problem and diabetes, you could help me roam the underpasses searching for her. Of course, I'd never say that. She has no idea how bad it really is.

I shift my Honda into the right lane for the off-ramp. Someone grabs my attention as they run across the overpass. It's a woman. She stops in the center of the bridge and holds up her middle finger to oncoming cars.

*"Holy Shit!"* It's Angie!

My hand sits on the horn. I drive up the ramp and hook a left hoping she doesn't climb onto the ledge of the bridge.

She's on the south side of the narrow walkway facing downtown. She's giving the finger with both hands. I'm on the opposite side of the street. I roll down the window and yell, *"Angie!"* She turns, and my heart breaks. Her swollen eyes are black and blue. Her lip is bleeding. I drive straight ahead into the zoo entrance and park.

I race across the street with the flow of traffic. Adrenaline sweeps away the pain from my ulcer.

*"Ahrh!"* she howls a wild animal yelp.

With her fists, she pounds the ledge.

*"Angie!"*

Vehicles speed 70 miles an hour or more under the bridge. Vibration from the cars shakes the overpass. Gas fumes, noise, the height, and the power from the traffic zooming under—my mind is swirling. I'm dizzy; my sister's battered face comes into focus.

I grab Angie. She wails as I force her skinny arms to her side and pick up all one-hundred pounds of her.

Cars stop on the overpass.

"Down! Put me down!" she shrieks, kicking her legs.

"Stop it."

"Let me go, asshole."

"I called 911," a man shouts from inside his truck.

"No!" Angie screams, freeing her arms, and scratching my neck.

"Damn it."

She thrashes. I'm losing. She's wily, presses her hand into my abdomen right where my ulcer is. I let go. She darts across traffic and takes off running toward Griffith Park.

I'm racing after her, dodging cars, "It's going to be okay, Angie."

Not until she's treated will she have a chance for anything near okay. But no one can force her. That's the law.

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Angie stops at the end of the bridge at a bumper-railing that curves down an incline to her nest. She's sobbing. Bruises circle her arms. I want to kill whoever hurt her.

"You need to go to the ER." Blood and dirt are caked in her long blonde hair. Her cut lips tremble. "We've got to report this." She mumbles, flicks her fingers. "Who hurt you? Do you know him?"

"Stop," she screams.

"My car's across the street. I have a first aid-kit. We'll clean you up. I've got food and clothes." This is the worst.

My poor mother, she'd die if she knew what happened.

For a year, Angie's survived on the streets and always by a freeway. She says the noise helps to muffle the voices. She's afraid of automobiles. For her, they're rooms with walls, moving in all directions where she'll never find her way home.

On rare occasions, she'll let me drive her to Denny's for a hamburger and fries. I've never betrayed her. I've always taken her back to her roost.

A siren blares then cuts off—the 911 call.

Angie runs.

I sprint after her, catching up, and gently take her arm. "C'mon, over there. To my car." We cross the street and into the parking lot.

She mutters to herself, twitches her fingers, laughs. She needs a doctor. I've thought of taking a couple of my mother's Xanax pills and dropping them into Angie's water bottle. Then what? She'd wake up in the hospital, play lucid, and run. I'd have to hunt for her all over again.

She's lived at the same off-ramp for months. It had my approval, until now, being the cleanest and safest—the Beverly Hilton of off-ramps and underpasses. It's her favorite because she loves the zoo. On a couple of occasions, we've gone inside, walked around, watched the gorillas, and eaten hotdogs, just like we did as kids. But she can't go back to her nest, not now.

I open the passenger door, toss the care package in the back, and ease Angie into the seat.

I'm a mixed bag of rage, sorrow, and relief that she wasn't murdered.

Inside the car, I reach for the packet of wipes and clean her

face.

“What did he look like?” I open the glove compartment and take out the first-aid kit. “When did it happen?”

“Oh, blah, blah, blah.”

“C’mon Angie. You want to see what you look like?”

She laughs, mutters to herself, and plays air-piano with her right fingers.

“It needs to be reported,” I say, taking a close look at the wounds on her face. From the first-aid kit, I remove an antibiotic ointment and dab it around her eyes, cheeks, and mouth.

“It stings.” She winces, turns away, and says, “NSFL.” Angie loves acronyms. *Not Safe For Life* is a favorite.

Every smell in the city—car exhaust, cement, garbage bins, dirt—has oozed into her pores. I run a cloth over her arms, take another wipe, and clean her hands.

With her eyes closed, she lifts her face toward the late afternoon sun and says, “5:17.”

I’ll be damned, just like my watch.

“It’s over, Angie.” Her face was once beautiful—she looked like a young Cate Blanchett—but has now been toughened by the sun, the streets, her sickness. Seeing her beaten makes me want to rip out the heart of the fucker who did this. “You hear me? It’s over.”

“Don’t cry Ronnie,” she says.

I flip down her sun visor and slide open the mirror. “Take a good look at your face and tell me you don’t need help.”

Angie flips up the shade.

It's tempting to feel sorry for her, but that would be a further assault. "There are places that can give you medicine, a roof over your head. Make you feel better."

"You make me feel better."

"I'm just a Band-Aid. I don't make you *get* better. Let me look at your scalp. I need to know if it's still bleeding."

"IDC," she says.

"I *do* care," I answer.

One afternoon when I took Angie to Denny's, our entire lunch was spoken in acronyms: ICYMI, OMG, FYI, BTW, EOD. I remember being amazed by, ILYRSIPYB—that she tossed off in a second, and then hugged me. She flinches when touched so when she embraced me, I felt honored. It took me days to figure out the acronym; *I love you Ronnie someday I'll pay you back.*

"Let me look," I say.

Angie turns her head. I separate the clumped strands and find the wound. It's clotted. I pour water onto a fresh cloth and dab it.

"What was he wearing?" She looks out the window at Griffith Park and the Santa Monica Mountains. "I can report him. But I need information."

She covers her ears with her hands.

I know when to back off, but this is different.

"The schmuck who hurt you is out there."

"Blah, blah, blah, blah blah," she says, shaking her head.

We sit together in silence, although what's going on inside of me is a roaring chaos of *WTF*.



“Do you want aspirin?”

“No.”

Silence. I’m tense, Angie’s in shock, and neither one of us knows the way out.

“I’ve got a cool apartment. You can take a hot shower. Brush your teeth. I’ve told you about Carlin. He’s the big fat tabby. You’d like him. Wanna meet him?”

“I wanna go home.”

“You can’t.”

“My estate needs me. I want my stuff.”

“Here,” I say, reaching behind and taking the package. “Put on fresh clothes. Then we’ll get your stuff and come back.”

Angie changes.

“I’m hungry.”

“Cookies?”

“Jogger mix. Currency. You have me some?”

“After we come back to the car.”

“LOL,” she says. A crow has swooped down and helped itself to a man’s French fries. We laugh. The moment is an escape for both of us.

I open the trail mix and hand her the bag. She pours the dried fruit and nuts into her mouth. Pieces fall on the car seat. Hamburgers are the worst. She stuffs as much of the burger into her mouth and then eats with her jaws open. Angie’s social graces fly over the coo-coo’s nest. I can’t help but compare her to who she was in the past—refined, even prim, as she’d dab the corners of her mouth. She went everywhere with

several bottles of hand sanitizer. She had a boyfriend and worked at Macy's to help put herself through college. Her last year at USC she made the Dean's List. Peri Software hired her as a technical writer and then fired her when she sent out a mass email to her coworkers with pornographic images. If her sanity returned, she'd be shocked by her behavior.

"I should have let the cops take you to the mental health facility."

"That place wears a headache."

"You faked it."

"It's Hollywood."

"They wanted to help you."

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Angie leads the way through brush and foliage. We swipe away branches and forage through dense vegetation. Nearby there's a trail that passes through a small narrow tunnel and runs parallel to the aqueduct. It's 6:00 p.m. I need to be at the studio by 7:00.

What's so important for her that she'd come back to the place where she'd been attacked? Or was she assaulted somewhere else?

Angie's nest is in a small clearing. The four-sided jumbo Sony TV box she calls home has been smashed. My old bed quilt is in a heap. A filthy tarp covers a partial area of the ground. Water bottles, food wrappers, and banana peels litter the area.

She's down on hands and knees squaring the edges of her house, reminding me of a bird; her thin limbs, darting eyes, the quick sudden movement of her hands, if only she had wings.

“Who crushed your house?”

She shrugs.

I crouch down and say, “Take what you need and let’s go.”

“You go,” Angie says.

“You’re not staying here.”

She puts the piece of the tarp inside the box and flattens out the cardboard she uses as a roof.

“Angie?”

Her right eye is almost shut.

“Give me my finances. My parcel.”

“That wasn’t the deal. C’mon, take what you need.” I’m not sure what I’ll do once she’s back in the car. I just want her away from here. “We’ll find a new home.”

She wobbles to her feet, crosses her arms, and gets in my face.

“You’ll jab me a knife.”

“I just saved you from being arrested.”

Angie sucks on a strand of hair like a sulking child and moves her hips side to side.

Sometimes I’ve wondered what’s stronger, love or guilt?

“If I’m late for work, they could fire my ass. C’mon.”

“No.”

“I’m not going to end up homeless like you.”

Angie giggles. “You’re mad.”

"I'm not sleeping in this shithole."

"Dirty word. Daddy's angry."

The mention of my father startles me. She knows he passed away. It's been a year and a half since he died. I wish he were here to help.

"You come. Or no money or package."

"Naughty naughty pants on fire."

"I'm not going to live like Tarzan and Jane." I bend forward trying to relieve the shooting pain in my abdomen.

Angie covers her ears with her hands. She's testing me, making sure she's the centerpiece of my life.

"I want the night here."

She moves in closer. We're nose-to-nose, so near I can smell the alcohol on her skin.

"You're older," Angie says. "You *have* to take care of me."

The truth explodes from my crazy sister's mouth, a belief I've lived with all of my life. It's so clear. How could I have missed it? I've become an enabler.

Letting go of rage, my own truth explodes, "Why don't you act normal like you did at the mental health place?"

Mumbling, she gets inside the box. She glances up at me and says, "Could you bring Carlin here?" And curls into a fetal position.

Defeated, I shake out my bed quilt and cover her.

"I need my roof."

On my knees, I lay the flat piece of cardboard on top.

“Sweet dreams, Angie.”

I make my way down the bank of overgrown weeds to the road and head toward the park.

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I need to calm down. I'm walking fast, past the zoo's parking lot across from the Gene Autry Museum and enter the picnic grounds in Griffith Park. I've been holding my breath for a year. I inhale, take in the fragrance of the eucalyptus trees and the approaching chill of the night. It seems there's no exit out of this hell, or could there be one, and I don't know it? What would you do, Dad?

I pass a couple on a bench. The woman kisses her man. I'd like to fall in love. I'd like to go places without worrying, live as big and wide as I can, change my stand-up into broader experiences than just commentary on the mentally ill and homelessness.

The pain in my abdomen subsides. Then I think of my sister curled up in a box like a kitten and the ache returns.

There's a homeless man sitting under a tree, talking to himself. His fingers flick like Angie's. Does his family know where he is? Or have they given up on him?

I won't give up on Angie. Will she ever trust me or talk to me again? I turn around, take out my phone, and call 911. Where's the humor in this?

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**DC Diamondopolous** is an award-winning short story, and flash fiction writer with hundreds of stories published

internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC's stories have appeared in: *Sunlight Press*, *Progenitor*, *34th Parallel*, *So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library*, *Lunch Ticket*, and others. DC was nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and twice for Sundress Publications' Best of the Net. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals. [dcdiamondopolous.com](http://dcdiamondopolous.com)

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