

# My Supercharged, Tricked Out, Bluetooth Wheelchair Life Force



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BERKELEY, Calif. — My best Route 88 AC transit friend has cancer. He’s waiting until the end of the holidays to “turn himself in” to the hospital, where they’ll “poke him all over,” but he knows in any case he has to do this soon because there’s a big lump on his stomach. I didn’t know how much I’d begun to care for him, my fellow in-a-wheelchair bus rider, until I felt my sadness become a different kind of lump in my throat.

My friend Olantis and his chair, Roscoe, emit more life than I’ve seen from any walkie. He tricked out Roscoe with some seriously powerful Bluetooth speakers through which he blasts the music that matches his mood — sometimes gospel, sometimes house, usually something with a good beat and lyrics that make you think. Olantis is big. He’s tall and fat. He’s black. His voice booms and his laugh ricochets. He goes so fast in Roscoe! The first time I saw him, before we’d officially met, he was zooming down Shattuck Avenue weaving in and out of groups of students walking in clusters with their oversized backpacks. His music was blasting. This man was up in every available sensory input of every single passer-by.

I wasn’t envious just that Roscoe had the horsepower to go so much faster than Anita (my own motorized wheelchair). I was also envious of Olantis’s flagrant disregard of social norms. I spend my days at Cal trying to balance my need to advocate my right to physically enter spaces with my perceived need to not offend anyone in the process — by dressing modestly, not too dykey, careful not to break any obvious gender or fashion rules; by keeping my mouth shut in the face of minor issues if I can deal with them on my own; by projecting a friendly and helpful attitude as much as I can. It doesn’t always work, though, so seeing and being with Olantis is sometimes liberating.

I make the two-mile commute most weekdays to fulfill my duties as a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley — to attend class, work as a teaching assistant, research or go to meetings. Anita helps me from home to school and in and out of the

buildings on campus as I deal with my collection of conditions — asthma, Type 1 diabetes, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and dysautonomia among them. Anita allows me to stay in the game and remain competitive as a student and teacher, despite the daily exclusions and presumptions of incompetence I face. I've learned to thicken my skin and employ my stubborn nature. But the connections I make with other disabled people like Olantis along the way help keep me going in ways Anita can't.

Olanis sells papers, the kind that homeless people sell for a dollar each. He has to collect them between 5 and 7 a.m. at the pickup point, and his pain has been worse recently, so he hasn't been able to go to sleep until 2 or 3 a.m. and he simply can't get up in time. "I sell papers," he said. "That's who I am. I'm nothing without my hustle." He continued on about feeling depressed and concerned about finances. This was our somber discussion that day on the 88 bus, which, like all the others, started at the beginning of the line. The conversation in which he told me he had cancer.

"I've seen you zoom down Shattuck!" I yelled. "I know you're gonna win!" I don't like to lose. He laughed and relished in the moment of my admitting defeat pre-race and asked to see me and Anita go at top speed. This is my kind of waiting-for-the-bus activity. So Anita and I went at it with all our might as he looked on laughing, saying, "Come on, that's it?"

I enter another space in a wheelchair, one in which the homeless and disabled people like Olantis are quick to greet me and talk to me while the able-bodied world averts its gaze. Even with my disability, I realize I am in a place of privilege — a white, middle-class woman pursuing a doctorate, with access to medical insurance. I know that Olantis does not share this privilege. I know that I am lucky to be in the space I am at Berkeley, but the challenges it brings can be emotionally draining and painful. My time with Olantis is anything but. The *crip-bus-bond* isn't just tolerant; it's fully embracing of me, *because* of my cripness, not in spite of it.

I love the world Olantis and Roscoe and Anita and I have created in our exile, where we are free to call our wheelchairs by name and bop to the music. Where we giggle too easily at the slightest perception of innuendo. Where we drag race and brag about getting first-class seats since the bus driver loads the wheelchairs first.

I hope Olantis survives his stomach cancer. I would really, really miss our fun evening commutes. I want to offer to get his papers at 5 a.m. so that he can keep selling them, but I know I'm too crip to do that, so I'll have to just listen and empathize, sit face to face with the truth that disability and poverty are intertwined, and understand how painful it is when we feel our bodies no longer able to carry out the activities that sustain us.

Olanis, if I make it longer than you do in this world that was never designed for us, if I'm still ignoring the haters who tell us we slow down their commute and you're not beside me, I hereby promise, I'll hook up Anita with Bluetooth speakers. We won't be invisible, or silent, with you and Roscoe as our supercharged, tricked out sensory-power life force.