

Not Every Knight Wears Armor, But the Spanish *Caballero* Lives On

Marsha Scarbrough

When I tell people that I moved to Spain alone at the age of 70, their first response is, “I admire your courage.”

Almost immediately after that comes the question, “Do you have a lover in Spain?” Surely, they figure, I must have followed my heart into a romantic relationship, because to most people, the idea of solo life in a foreign country is just too...well, scary.

The answer is no. I have no lover in Spain (at least, not so far). However, I have *caballeros*. The direct translation from Spanish is “horseman,” but, in common usage, a *caballero* is a gentleman.

My first *caballero* was my friend Alberto. He had been my English student in the U.S. When he returned to the university as a visiting professor of fine arts, we became good friends. He hosted me when I visited Spain and helped me as I was getting my retirement visa together. He let me use his address and bank account to get the required health insurance, picked me up at the airport, and helped me open my own bank account and find an apartment.

After one session of untangling red tape, he said, “Let me know if you need help with anything else. I’m your *caballero*.”

“Of course, I know you are a gentleman,” (although an unlikely one, as a 40-something performance artist with shaggy hair, a scruffy beard, and horn-rim glasses), “but what do you mean, exactly?”

“Marsha,” he explained, “a *caballero* is not just a man with good manners. A *caballero* is a knight. That’s where the idea comes from, a knight in shining armor on a white horse. What does the knight do?

He serves his lady. I am at your service.”

Chivalry still exists in Spain. I see its vestiges in places like the metro, where young people jump up to offer me their seat. Of course, a sign in every car instructs people to offer their seats to pregnant women, elders, and women with children, but my point is that they actually *do* it. In the wee hours, after a night on the town with friends, the men in the group check with each woman to see if she needs a taxi or would like to be walked home. Yes, they will actually walk you home.

My second *caballero* is a young chef from Córdoba. Our first encounter was on the dancefloor. We went out for a drink afterward and discovered that we had many interests in common, including meditation and yoga as well as dance. JuanJo Galán, who sports mismatched earrings, tattoos, and hair shaved on the sides with a jaunty top-knot, asked for my phone number.

Later, he called and offered to come to my house and cook for me. I accepted. He taught me how to make *sofrito* as we drank Rioja wine and chatted about metaphysics and shamanism. I was impressed by his curiosity and quick intelligence. As he left, he kissed me on both cheeks and said, “If you need anything, call me. I’m your *caballero*.” He meant it.

JuanJo lives near me in Madrid, so I can call him and say, “The lightbulb is burned out in the kitchen ceiling,” and he will respond, “I will be there in 15 minutes.” In 15 minutes, my doorbell rings, the lightbulb is changed, and we chat over a glass of wine.

A few months ago, I began to have serious pain in my knee. I saw a specialist.

She gave me a cortisone shot and told me I would be back to my normal activities in a day. By the next afternoon, the pain was worse than ever, and I took a taxi to the emergency room, convinced that something was terribly wrong. They took an X-ray, gave me stronger pain meds, and told me to go back to the specialist.

I got an appointment with her a couple of days later, but I wasn’t sure I could get to her office without help, and since I knew her English was not any better than my Spanish, I felt like I needed a translator. I asked JuanJo to go with me.

He helped me in and out of the taxi, steadied me up and down stairs, conveyed my concerns to the doctor, and clarified her comments to me. The upshot was that I needed an ultrasound. The facility in her clinic was booked solid, and she gave JuanJo a long list of places where I might be able to get an appointment.

As a lifelong feminist, I never thought I’d sing the praises of chivalry, but there I was, safe in the care of my self-appointed knight.

I sat in the sterile clinic lobby watching JuanJo make call after call, insisting (in Spanish) that they must give me an appointment the very next day. I felt a little teary when I realized that it was the first time in my life that a man had ever taken care of me. I thanked him for that, and he hugged me. I said, “You are a true *caballero*.” He said, “I have to be. It is my name. ‘Galán’ means ‘gallant.’”

Here’s to the gallant *caballeros* of Spain. Long may they ride. ■

“Yes, the men in Spain will actually walk you home.”



Marsha Scarbrough moved from Santa Fe, New Mexico to Europe in 2017, and enjoys sharing her experiences of living in Madrid and saying “yes” to life.



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