

# Graduation Day

by [Peter Glassman](#) (June 2024)



Three Friends in a Cab– Salman Toor, 2021

It happens every May and June whenever I listen to the songs of the '50s or today's San Antonio station 101.1. The Four Lads sing their 1958 hit, *Graduation Day*. It brings fond memories of my closest 1958 Medford High School graduation friends from Massachusetts–Wendell, Mel, Carli, and Deb. All but Carli were Jewish. Wendell, Mel, and Deb lived in West Medford, as did many Jewish families. Carli and I lived in South Medford–Little Italy.

I didn't get in touch with my Jewish heritage until I started high school. That's when Deborah Sterling introduced herself. We were in the same homeroom.

"Michael Waxman? How come we never met? You're Jewish, right?" Deb was my height with a Debbie Reynolds face.

"I'm Jewish. I live in South Medford. My cousins and my grandparents live right down the street. They're Italian."

Her cute chin developed a subtle dimple with a magnetic smile. She touched my hand as she closed her locker next to mine. "Italian? You said you're Jewish."

"My father's Jewish, and religion-wise, we're Jewish, but we grew up Italian." I don't know why I offered her this information. She moved closer.

"You have to get into AZA. I'm in BBG." The buzzer rang for us to get into our homeroom for an attendance check.

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Deb lingered when school got out that day, and a muscular sophomore came over to us.

"Michael, this is Wendell Golden. He's pledging AZA."

I swallowed and whispered, "What's AZA?"

Golden shook my hand, "It's a Zionist high school fraternity. Aleph Zadick Aleph are Hebrew letters and the name for the national Jewish youth group—males only."

Deb jumped right into the conversation, "And BBG is the B'nai Brith Girls—the sister organization. The Christians have similar student groups like Demolay and Rainbow Girls."

Golden put a hand on my shoulder. "You can be a pledge like me. We meet every Sunday morning. I'll get you to ride with me and Melvin Slinger. He's a pledge, too, and already has his

driver's license. Oh, look, here's a guy who works out with me at Gold's Gym. He's from South Medford." Golden waved for Carli to come over.

When Carli got close, Deb withdrew a few feet from us. Carli was a handsome, well-muscled six-footer, feared by the entire student body. He wasn't a bully but was very protective of being Italian. No one messed with Carli Santo.

"Yeah, I know Michael. He lives near me. His cousins are the Pignones. You know Butch and Marie."

Golden nodded. Deb moved farther away. She was afraid of Carli and looked terrified when Gino Ginelli, a noted student roughneck, stopped and stared at us.

Ginelli inched closer to Carli, "You suckin' up to the Jews now, Carli?"

In seconds Carli's left hand shot out and grabbed Ginelli's throat. His right hand smashed into Ginelli's nose, producing a gush of bright crimson blood.

"Keep your distance, Gino. These are my friends. Go tell the school nurse a toilet seat fell on your head." He released Ginelli's bloody face and smiled at Deb. "Guys like Gino give us Italians a bad name."

From that day on, the five of us would be friends through graduation and beyond. Mel would join us as I progressed through AZA membership.

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Notoriety seemed to follow Carli. He was once arrested for possession of a stolen car. His boss at the automotive shop where he worked part-time, got all legal actions erased via mob connections. Carli arrived at school one day, driving a brand new white 1955 Cadillac Eldorado convertible. It was a gift from his boss. Carli had saved his life during a drive-by

shooting. His boss's shop contributed cars for Medford High's student auto repair program for which the school was very grateful. Carli was a top auto-mechanic student. His relationship with the illegal auto chop shop was overlooked by the police and everyone at school. He used to joke about our taking college courses.

"You guys may come across as smart but you, Deb, who did you call when your car died on the Fellsway last month?"

Deb smiled, "You, Carli. You came like a savior knight with that white Cadillac of yours."

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When we were seniors, we kept talking about what we were to do after high school graduation. By our last high school Christmas, Golden, Mel, Deb, and I had been accepted to college. We usually met to celebrate certain holidays together and I took Deb, at Carli's urging, to a Santo Italian family party. It was a combination of a Christmas and a birthday party for Carli's elderly grandfather. I played my accordion. Deb was my date, but it was Carli who had asked her. She sidled up to Carli after a ravioli and turkey feast and asked him what he was going to do after graduation.

"I'm going to work for Alphonso's Automotive Repair."

"Is there a future in that?"

"You see what I drive to school—a Cadillac. Most people don't ride in a Cadillac unless it's a hearse at their funeral." Carli maneuvered her under the mistletoe and planted a loud kiss.

She blushed, "Carli, I'm with Michael! Besides, mistletoe is not a Jewish tradition."

"You sang Christmas Carols with us, didn't you?"

Everyone was smiling at their banter.

“I love Christmas Carols, Carli.”

“So, you don’t like kissing one of your best friends?” He picked her up by her shoulders, positioned her again under the mistletoe, and kissed her.

Everyone applauded, and I played *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, which got everyone singing, cheering, and laughing.

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Carli drove us home from the Santo festivity. Deb was in front with Carli, who was holding her hand. I was in the backseat. Carli smiled as we arrived at Deb’s house. He spoke to her in a low voice. “Deb, I was surprised your parents gave you the okay to go to my family’s Christmas party. What did you tell them?”

“Oh, Carli, my dad asked what Italians were like, and I told them what you told me when I asked you. You told me Italians are like Jews. They have a strong sense of family and protect each other.”

Carli and I walked Deb to her door. She gave me a goodnight peck on the cheek and turned to Carli. “Carli, there’s no mistletoe.”

“So what.” He embraced Deb and gave her a Hollywood hug and a kiss. The front door opened at the same time with Deb’s mother and father witnessing the no-mistletoe romantic contact. Her mother recognized Carli from his pictures in the local newspapers. She fainted in her husband’s arms.

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Today, whenever I hear *Graduation Day* sung in May or June, I remember our tiny clique from the class of 1958. Golden’s a retired Florida dentist. Mel’s a retired Florida lawyer. I’m a

retired physician and current San Antonio author. Deb became a nurse but fell victim to the Boston Strangler in the 1970s. Carli became a hitman for the Boston mob. He was serving seven consecutive life sentences for murder. He received an eighth life term after killing Albert DeSalvo, the notorious Boston Strangler, and a prisoner in the same Walpole, Massachusetts' Maximum Security State Prison.

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Carli Santo was a good guy who would do anything for a friend or relative. He didn't like bigotry as he often said, "America is made up of minorities like us. You add the Irish, Blacks, Hispanics, Europeans, and other immigrants—what have you got? Americans that's what!"

I wrote about the days of our youth and camaraderie, to show the world what a true friend he was in adolescence, even though he chose the wrong road to criminality in adulthood. My novel gives him a better life alternative in a "what if" scenario.

*This story is inspired by the author's Boston Strangler novel, Who Will Weep for Me.*

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Peter Glassman MD, PhD, LCDR, USN is a retired physician living in Texas, who devotes his time to writing novels and memoir-based fiction. He is the author of 14 novels including the medical thrillers *Cotter*; *The Helios Rain* and *Who Will Weep for Me*. Some of his short stories were written for presentation at the San Antonio Writers Group Meetup. You can read more about him and his books [here](#).

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