

The Lost Picture Show

by [Paul Illidge](#) (May 2023)



Reading the Letter, Pablo Picasso, 1921

She said later she recognized me the moment my friend James Morton and I walked up to the reception counter at the *Musée d'Art Contemporain*. I was visiting Montreal for a week, staying with James and his wife, a trip to the contemporary art museum always on our agenda when I came to town.

The name badge pinned to the lapel of her museum blazer read *Sylvie Renaud*. She beamed a smile at me, kept it going as James and I purchased our tickets, passing our money, without looking at it, to the woman in a museum blazer beside her whose name badge read *Andrea Proulx*. Handing us our tickets, Andrea pointed us to the cloakroom across the way.

Few people about at that time on a Monday afternoon, Sylvie came smiling out from behind the counter and walked us over to the cloakroom, where she took our coats, put them on hangers, handing us our coat-check numbers.

Her eyes meeting mine whenever they could, she smiled as if she knew me from somewhere, or we'd met before and she was waiting for me to remember when and where. I returned her smiles, puzzled and slightly uncomfortable since I didn't understand what would have made me the focus of such undivided attention.

"*The Last Picture Show*," she blurted in French-accented but otherwise clear English as we returned to the reception area. "I can't tell you how much I loved that movie," she continued. "There was just something about it that completely captured me and wouldn't let go."

James piped up to say he was going to visit the men's room quickly.

"You wouldn't remember," Sylvie said, "but I met you in Toronto when you were filming your later movie *The Paper Chase*. I was studying French at University of Toronto. Victoria College, where I went, was the movie's major location, standing in for Harvard Law School."

I had seen the movie. I had been a student at Victoria College at the same time as Sylvie and between classes had watched *The Paper Chase* scenes being filmed—

"—You were coming downstairs after filming a scene," she spoke with excitement. "I was running up to a class on the third floor. Star-struck and staring at you instead of watching where I was going, I tripped and started to fall backwards. You saw me, jumped down three steps, grabbed my hands and held me up. You apologized, I don't know why when it was my carelessness. But it was such a thoughtful thing to do that I've never forgotten it. You became a kind of rescue obsession for me—I don't mean in a creepy way. Seeing you in real life ... it takes me back to my own small-town teenage life which, on the funny side, includes Ollie Duncan, the theatre manager in our town, putting *Lost* instead of *Last* on the marquee when he showed the film. *The Lost Picture Show*. It became a town joke. *Hey, did they ever find that lost picture show?*

We both laughed, watching James return.

As we headed for the galleries, I explained to him what had just transpired. "She's convinced I'm the actor who starred in *The Last Picture Show*."

"Timothy Bottoms movie. Seventies. I remember it. Black and white. Extra-depressing story of teenagers in a deadbeat Texas panhandle town. I remember Bottoms having an affair with his basketball coach's neglected wife. I think it got some Oscar nominations."

"I should have stopped her."

“She mistook you for a movie star, that’s—”

“Hold on,” I cut him off. “Don’t turn around.”

Sylvie was approaching behind him.

“I wanted to catch you before you entered the galleries,” she smiled walking up. “My associate Andrea wonders if it’s not too much trouble she might have your autograph?” She held out a pen and a clipboard with a blank sheet of museum stationery on it.

I looked at James as if to say: *What now?*

He shrugged as if to say: *You’re on your own, pal.*

Sylvie met my eyes, flashing a more nervous than friendly smile.

I took the pen and clipboard: *To Andrea, All the best, Timothy Bottoms.*

And instantly felt the pangs of fraud. Why hadn’t I said something to her, apologized for any confusion and been done with it? Why had I let vanity and ego cloud the issue of false pretences?

I handed back the clipboard. Sylvie gave the autograph an enthusiastic smile. “Andrea will be *très heureux*,” she said. Then quickly added: “Well, since my shift will be done by the time you’ve made your rounds, I’ll say goodbye. It was such a pleasure to meet you.” She put out her hand for Jim to shake, which he did, saying in French it had been a pleasure to meet her.

She held up the clipboard with the autograph. “Andrea thanks you. *Merci!*” And without a look to me, turned and walked off.

James made a face. “That was a little weird.”

“A little. I was on the verge of telling her.”

"I wouldn't worry. Like I said, you made her and her friend's day. What are they supposed to tell people: we *almost* ran into the actor Timothy Bottoms from *The Last Picture Show*? They need proof."

"Who would even remember that movie? *Who would remember Timothy Bottoms?*"

"You'd be surprised," James said. "People retain their adolescent obsessions. Truman Capote said *"All our adult issues are unresolved adolescent ones."*

And with that we headed off to view the exhibits.

Sylvie not on the reception desk when we came to collect our coats, Andrea wasn't there either. Another woman walked us to the cloakroom, took our tickets and handed us our coats.

As we stepped out into the nippy January air, I grabbed my gloves from my coat pocket and slipped them on.

James, a step behind, told me to hold on. An envelope had fallen out of my coat pocket. He stooped, retrieved it and, after glancing at it, handed it over with a knowing smile: *Timothy B.* was written on the front of a sealed *Musée Contemporain* envelope.

"Looks like you've got yourself a stalker," James teased as we started for the subway. Stuffing the envelope back in my coat pocket, I told him I'd had enough of being Timothy Bottoms for now. I'd read my fan mail later.

I spent a pleasant evening with Jim and his wife Chantal, who was amused but at the same time fascinated to hear about my encounter with Sylvie. I mentioned the letter. Chantal grew even more fascinated.

Imagine me talking to you about a film that you starred

in," she had written on Contemporain stationery (the same piece on which I'd signed Timothy Bottoms' autograph), "and which I watched at the movie theatre when we were the same age, being born eleven days apart (I looked that up, I'm afraid).

I suppose I responded to you as I did today because it felt like you appeared from several-worlds-ago in my life, if that makes any sense. The small town Last Picture Show World came rushing back to me. To be honest, it overwhelmed me to see you in the flesh, especially that you still have your beautiful curly hair!!

I had no idea how to react in seeing you, other than the impulsive way I did (something I'm known for, I hate to admit). Once again you proved to be a gentleman, acting with quiet humility and understanding toward an overzealous fan.

If for any reason you wanted to, or could, meet me tomorrow, my day off, I'd appreciate being given a second chance at saying a proper hello, asking how things are going in your life, the usual stuff people say to one another when meeting after many years.

I more than understand if you'd rather not. I wouldn't blame you. However, it seemed important enough for me at least to ask for a second chance by dropping this letter in your coat pocket.

If you find yourself inclined to accept the invitation, you could meet me at 12:15 outside the McGill University bookstore (sorry for the poorly drawn diagram), and we could go from there.

If not, well, I have to admit I'll be disappointed, however it's my own fault."

Take care of yourself, Timothy.

All best wishes, Sylvie.”

Chantal gasped, turning to James. “How can he *not* go to meet this woman after a letter like that?”

“How can I not?” I agreed, my view of the situation having changed entirely with Sylvie’s intriguing missive. I did some research on Timothy Bottoms before bed ...

I found the McGill University bookstore with no problem. As I was early, I headed inside for a quick browse. I went through the literature section looking for a book of plays an actor friend had asked me to find and purchase while I was in Montreal if I could.

There it was in the drama section. I grabbed it, took the escalator down to the front desk and was paying for the book when, to my surprise, at the next cashier there was Sylvie’s work mate, Andrea Proulx, buying a book as well.

We went outside, Andrea apologizing that Sylvie was unable to come. “She fell off a kitchen step-stool trying to reach a cupboard above her refrigerator and broke her leg. She’s embarrassed more than anything else, probably not mobile until she has a walking cast put on. Could she meet you next week?”

“I’m just visiting my friend James and his wife for a few days. I’ll be flying home to California first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Where in California?”

“Big Sur. I raise horses there.”

“No more acting?”

“No more acting.”

“Is that for the best?”

"It is."

"I'll be sure to tell Sylvie."

"Tell her too that if she's ever in Big Sur, to ask for me in town and someone will be sure to direct her to my ranch."

"You never know with Sylvie. She just might do that. She's quite a character."

"So I gather."

We laughed.

"Thank her for speaking to me. I didn't think there were many people around who'd remember the *Last Picture Show*, especially in Canada. My fifteen minutes of fame were up years ago."

"Not with Sylvie. You don't know much about girls' adolescent fantasies." She leaned forward and kissed my one cheek. "She thinks of herself as your number one fan." She kissed my other cheek, stepped back and winked. "I'm number two."

"So the autograph really *was* for you."

"Of course! Anyway, if you come to visit your friend again you can always get in touch with us at the *Contemporain*." She handed me her and Sylvie's business cards.

And with that we parted.

Home with James and Chantal, I explained about Sylvie's accident, described my pleasant conversation with Andrea and the ease with which I embraced my inner Timothy Bottoms.

That afternoon Chantal rented a DVD of *The Last Picture Show* at the neighbourhood video store. We sat down to watch it that night after dinner:

Exterior. Town Square. Dawn.



In black and white. A cold, windy morning in the east Texas panhandle.

Except for one parked car—an old white Nash Metropolitan—the square is deserted. Wind blows the curling dust and tumbleweeds down the empty main street, past the picture show, a laundry, a dinky beauty parlour, a grocery store and a pool hall.

An old Chevrolet pickup truck comes coughing its way up the road leading to the town square. At the wheel is 17 year-old Sonny Crawford, better known as Timothy Bottoms ...

[Table of Contents](#)

Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*,

Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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