

HE'S GOT YOUR BACK (TO THE FUTURE)

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

--The Bible, John 15:13

One critic has noted that, fundamentally, *Back to the Future* is about fathers and sons. This may be true, but with the shift away from George McFly, in the sequels Marty's relationship with Doc is the central dynamic. Where Marty saw almost no character development (he overcomes his fear of failure), and Doc nominally more (he realizes he's not a failure), both men face great emotional challenges in the sequels that strengthen their love for each other. After all, they are the world's first time travelers, and nobody else can understand the anxious dilemmas they have faced over the course of two real-time weeks following the morning of October 26, 1985.

Distracted by his own problems, Marty forgot Doc's invitation to meet at Twin Pines Mall. Reminded by a late-night phone call, Doc's greeting at the mall is ebullient: "Marty—you made it!" Marty doesn't know what is going on, but Doc has built a time machine, and on this, the most important night of his life, the one person Doc wants with him is rock-and-roller Marty McFly. That speaks volumes, but more significant is Doc's declaration as the Lebanese attack: "I'll draw their fire!" He has involved Marty in a deadly situation and he's determined to protect the innocent Marty at the risk of his own life. Spared destruction in a hail of bullets, now Marty returns Doc's gesture of sacrifice in his own way.

A careful examination of the parking lot chase shows Marty knew what he was doing and fully intended to escape into the past and thereby save his best friend. Marty turns the time circuits on and, having already safely outdistanced the Libyans, watches with trepidation as the speedometer approaches 88 miles per hour. He knows what will happen. Sure, once he acquaints himself with 1955 he realizes the serious ramifications of that choice, particularly when Doc informs him that no plutonium is available. His primary concern then becomes getting back to 1985. But even so, Marty is willing to miss his one chance—the lighting strike—by lingering at the clock tower yelling up at Doc. Marty would rather sacrifice his own future than sacrifice Doc's life.

With Marty's arrival at the Brown mansion, Doc has a little difficulty adjusting to "Future Boy," but they soon get along handily. In one week Marty affects Doc so much that he expresses the most profound sentiment of the three films—"It's gonna be really hard waiting thirty years before I can talk to you about everything that's happened in the past few days," a task made infinitely more difficult by '83 or '84, once Marty's friendship with Doc had begun.

Marty had shown Doc that his life was not futile questing. Sure, he had invented a time machine, but, in a nod to *It's A Wonderful Life*, Marty shows the misunderstood and maligned Doc Brown that he has a real friend waiting for him. Even though he's known Marty but a few

days, '55 Doc is willing to risk his life by zip-lining down the world's longest extension cord to brave the 1.21 gigawatts that will send his new friend home. This is one special friendship.

But that was almost the end of it. Returning to a new 1985, Marty appears too late and his tears at Doc's second death are heartbreaking. After braving the unknown for his friend, all his efforts have come to this. It's a common dream among men to stop death. Marty, in a radical way using radical means, tried and, it would seem, failed.

But then Doc blinks. And with his resurrection, our wish is to be Marty McFly and stop our friends from dying. We wish, at least, we had one more chance to be with them. Herein lies one of the great, hidden attractions of *Back to the Future*.

The next morning Doc Brown returns from the future. He granted his friend a much needed night's rest. He maneuvers Marty to ensure that only one generation will fall, and not two. Doc knows that, for Marty, it's already too late. Doc has decided that, since Marty will hit the cream Rolls-Royce later that morning, perhaps he can keep him away from 1985 long enough to learn some lessons of his own and keep from drag racing with Needles. Where it was, before, Marty 'playing God' by resurrecting Doc, now it is Doc who is imbued with a quasi-omniscience.

But Doc refuses to intervene directly, perhaps knowing that, as a lasting change occurred with George McFly only when the staged incident with Marty became a real incident with Biff, so here, if Doc warns Marty of the car crash, Marty's guitar hand and confidence will be spared, but his hubris, temper, and smug self-satisfaction will forever cloud his judgment, making his fall inevitable. This is a deep problem Marty must figure out for himself.

Doc's more traditional lessons extend to the morality of gambling (at least when it isn't). Regarding *Gray's Sports Almanac*, Doc doesn't want Marty to get rich for nothing. Sure, it probably won't make much difference as far as the space-time continuum goes, but Marty McFly, though a veritable Superman in the first film, is in *Part II* revealed as a superficial (but charming) conniver with an ugly (but understandable) determination to be rich. If Marty had taken the book back to '85, he would have become a more benign version of Biff-From-Hell circa Alternate 1985. Marty can't manage his greed, nor his mania for approval. He will compromise his values to save face, as he does vis-à-vis Needles in 2015 and 1985.

Biff only wanted to please himself. Marty mainly wants to please others. But the ugly consequences are the same. A rich man without convictions is like a locomotive that has jumped the tracks.

Doc must at least feel the same temptations. He realizes that a brilliant man with a time machine at his disposal can rule the world, provided he does not, by profiting from the future, change the present in such a way that the future he visits never occurs (or, apocalyptically, never occurs at all).

With the opening scenes of *Part III*, Marty has his first chance to relax in a long while. He and Doc spend their days excavating and researching but neither talks about the last thing they talked about before Marty scrambled to the starting line in the events of *Part I*. They don't

talk about the Libyans. Marty knows that Doc will keep the letter and Doc knows he's already risked too much. Any further discussion of the matter could bring death.

Like all good friends, Doc and Marty take on the other's characteristics. In *III*, Doc becomes more emotional and Marty becomes less tempestuous and more thoughtful. Doc, now adept at shooting a rifle, riding a horse, and catching a hover board with his foot, is Marty's equal in physicality. Marty can bear the stigma of outcast and pariah (the consequences of not dueling with Buford Tannen) that Doc has worn with fortitude and grace his entire life. Doc smiles for the clock photograph (Marty does not), Marty says, "Great Scott!" and Doc remarks, "This is heavy."

Their role reversal is complete as Marty does choose to face Tannen—but only because Doc is a hostage threatened with death. Marty got Doc in this position—his greed precipitated the rise of Tyrannical Biff, he failed to secure the almanac (leading to the DeLorean getting zapped back to 1885), and he stupidly accepted Tannen's challenge to duel, which now fuels the Mad Dog's rage at being denied a kill. So, like Doc and the terrorists ("I'll draw their fire!"), Marty is fully responsible and must risk his life to save Doc's. The bravery Marty demonstrates in this scene is jaw-dropping (that's a very small shield).

Following the train sequence (the most exciting bit in any of the movies) and the date with fate (Needles, Jennifer, and the Rolls-Royce), Doc makes one more appearance.

Marty has just looked down at the photograph of Doc with the 1885 clock. The left side had been torn away. Doc gives Marty a gift—a photo of him and Marty by the clock, Marty standing on the left, the part of the old image (originally blank) that was torn away. Now there is completion.

Together they have learned that every event of history (both 'past' and 'future') recurs infinitely and cannot resist being molded by the determined will of man. So if their friendship suffers from a neglect engendered by the unbridgeable gap of time, they can always relive their adventures of the past together, in the future.

If Doc hadn't caught the hover board, and Marty kept his cool and did not scramble out to try and collect Doc and Clara, he would have closed the gull wing door and allowed Doc and Clara to die, because if Marty dies, there's no hope for any of them.

Given that he's got about ten seconds before temporal displacement, it's doubtful that Marty will have the presence of mind to change the Destination and go straight to 2015. If he does arrive in 1985, we would hope against hope that the death of Clara and Doc has somehow resulted in the October 26, 1985 Hill Valley train schedule being changed just enough so the DeLorean is not immediately destroyed. (So would we have Shonash, Clayton, or Eastwood Ravine?)

Marty's plan would be to lock the car, retrieve Jennifer from the porch, grab as many containers of gasoline as possible, escape the grasp of the mob that will descend on the car, take the DeLorean (still on the tracks) to 2015 (leaving quaking denizens in his fiery wake), lie to the tow trucker and suspicious authorities, get (another) hover conversion, then blast back to 1885 to make sure that Doc (and maybe Clara) safely arrive in 1985. He would try to alert Doc without alerting his double (the other Marty). Or, if that didn't work, (extreme possibility) he

may kill his other self, assume the role of that incarnation of Marty so Doc doesn't know, and make preparations for Clara's appearance when they're barreling towards the ravine.

And if Marty failed, or if the space-time continuum was too damaged as a result of his intervention (to the extent that the '85 they knew didn't exist), he would keep going back earlier and earlier until he got it right and Doc was saved. Marty would try, and keep trying, until he died or Jennifer went insane. He would stop short of pulling the whole fabric of the universe down around them, but he would never stop fighting against the vicissitudes of time. That's true friendship and one awe-inspiring suggestion of the mischievously complex Back to the Future trilogy.