

INTRODUCTION

On 23 April 2017, three hours into the London Marathon, a runner made his last delirious steps towards the finish line. For the last 4 miles he had battled against fatigue; now he had reached the very limit of his endurance. With less than 200 metres to go, in front of the cameras and the huge crowds, he staggered forward, legs awkwardly apart, clearly determined to finish. But he was barely able to stand. Runners swarmed past. He swayed. A fellow competitor stopped and asked him if he was okay. As he did so, the poor man crashed on to his back. Ignoring the chance to continue his own race, the helper lifted the man to his feet. He fell again. So the Good Samaritan picked him up, hauled his arm over his shoulder, and walked with him to the finish line. Next day, the front pages of all the newspapers carried a picture of the two of them. The great story of that race was not who won or how fast the winning time was. For once, no one even cared who had the most extraordinary costume. The headline of *The Times* summed it up perfectly: 'Marathon's true winner is human kindness'.

This scene vividly showed everyone the truth about running. It's not about the *running*. It is about the challenges we face and how we measure up to them. It is about companionship. It is about endurance, ambition, hope, conviction, determination, self-respect and inspiration. It is about how we choose to live our lives, and what it means to share our values with other people.

I had been thinking about this whole phenomenon for a few months before I watched Matthew Rees help David Wyeth over the line that day. For me, the epiphany had been a 5K parkrun with my thirteen-year-old son, Oliver. We had driven into Exeter together, both of us somewhat glum. I had a pain in my hip; he was just in a bad mood. Nevertheless, I managed to set a time I had been trying to run for months. I was exultant – jubilant, even – but where was Oliver? Way back, more than 2 minutes outside his best. When he finished he was despondent and uncommunicative. Asked about his run, he replied simply, 'Awful.' He did not ask about mine, and I hadn't the heart to tell him. He changed out of his running kit and, with a hug and a wistful 'See you later, Dad', headed off into town to do whatever teenage boys get up to when their parents aren't around. I drove home and went back to work. But about 2 hours later I received a telephone call. It was Oliver – the first time he had ever rung me on my office line. He had checked my result as well as his own and knew instantly what that time would mean to me. He was so eager to congratulate me he had to ring straight away, even though he was just about to catch the bus home. As I put the phone down, I reflected on how lucky I was – not because I had achieved my target time but because I had such a son.

You can't experience moments like these and not be aware that people who run together share a bond. They may have many things in common anyway but running together imparts insights, values and understandings that go far beyond their normal level of kinship or friendship. That realisation made me compose a list of all the other things that I had learned from running. As I did so, I found myself writing the following line:

First you run for fitness. Next you run for speed. Then you run for meaning.

For a brief moment I toyed with the idea of beginning a book with those words. Almost immediately, however, my literary inner policeman stepped in. Running is essentially a humble pursuit. It is the very antithesis of such portentous and grandiose phrases. If I were to start with such a mantra, people would undoubtedly shake their

heads and reply: 'No, Ian, we just run in our own separate ways for our own individual reasons, don't try to tell us why.' Besides, who would want to read a book about running by me? I'm a historian and novelist by profession, not an athlete; what do I know? I'm not even fast for my age. However, those words did not go away. They lingered in my mind, especially the *you run for meaning* bit.

Five months passed. Gradually I came to realise that if you want to write about running, it's what you have to say that matters, not how fast you run. Let the good runners demonstrate their extraordinary skills in winning races, that is their strength. Mine is writing. One day I remembered that the very first time I'd had to use my literary skills outside a classroom I was similarly unqualified to write about the subject in question. It was when I was at boarding school, aged fourteen. I found that I could avoid the welter of punishments that the senior boys inflicted on us daily by supplying them with erotic fiction. At that age I hadn't attempted a quarter of the sexual shenanigans I wrote about, and many of my peers had much more experience with girls than I did, but I had buckets of imagination and an eye for detail. In this way I managed to avoid punishment totally for a whole year. Reflecting on that experience, I realised there was no excuse for putting off my running book any longer. After all, if you can write about people having fun with their kit *off*, you should certainly be able to describe them doing so with their shorts *on*.

Having thus looked beyond my athletic shortcomings, I felt free to describe what running means to me and the people I know. It poses profound questions, prompting you to consider everything from your self-belief and physical fitness to the choices you make and what it means to be alive. Unlike every other competitive activity I can think of, there are no rules as to how you actually do it – except those which guard against cheating – and yet, partly because of this absence of direction, you cannot help but develop a myriad of mental strategies to enable you to get from A to B as quickly or as comfortably as possible. And that just accounts for how you deal with your *personal* challenges. How you might help other people meet their ambitions adds another mass of intellectual and emotional calculations. This is why every run makes me feel like I am entering a great cathedral for the first time. I am an open-mouthed spectator, looking up, simply amazed at what there is to behold. I see acts of kindness and consideration, even among strangers. I see courage, determination, sadness, resignation and joy in almost every event. Most of all, I see the difference between thinking of myself as an *individual* – someone who is divided off from the crowd – and as a *person*, someone who is connected in some way to everyone else. Given this level of inspiration, it is hardly surprising that I wanted to share my thoughts. If you stumbled into a great cathedral for the first time, would you not want to tell people about it?

I had a second reason for wanting to write about running. I was forty-nine, approaching the half-century bell. Although I could not know how many laps of life's circuit I had left to run, this much was obvious: fifty would mark the beginning of a decade that carried with it the responsibility to prepare for diminishing physical ability and, eventually, death. Fifty might not seem that old these days but in the past, most people would have counted themselves lucky to reach that age. As recently as 1900, life expectancy at birth for British men was forty-four, and for women forty-eight. At the same time, I was aware that it would be morbid to prepare for my twilight years and not celebrate still being alive. Indeed, the very awareness of death's distant drum gave me reason to celebrate life more than ever before. As Nikos Kazantzakis put it in *Zorba the Greek*, 'Leave nothing for death but a burned-out castle.' Why leave your wine cellar stocked with your finest vintages? Why leave any books unwritten, any songs unsung,

any sweetness untasted? Leave no race unrun! The man or woman who comes last in a race is at least beating those who do not take part. He or she is at least beating death.

So I decided to write this book. Or, to be precise, at the end of 2016 I made two New Year's resolutions that led to me doing so. The first was to take part in 50 amateur events over the course of the forthcoming year: 45 parkruns and five half marathons. The second was to write down not only what happened during each of those runs but also what I learned in the process. I hoped to produce a book that readers would find thought-provoking, whether they be runners, parkrunners, half-marathoners, aspiring marathon runners – or simply people approaching middle age wondering if running might help them come to terms with watching the years flash by.

I hope I have succeeded. I hope you enjoy the result. But I hope even more that you take something from your running as a consequence of reading this book and use it to your advantage. For while books are often described as 'treasure chests', this one is the key to riches you already have in your possession.

And maybe even to your own great cathedral.