How do you *accidentally* run a marathon?

My friend Karen has just asked me this question (as she had read that that was what I had done) and, since she is not the first to wonder, I thought I'd share the answer.

Last year, when coronavirus was forcing us all into lockdown, the 2020 London Marathon had to be cancelled. It was put back to October. I thought nothing of it at the time, as I normally watch it on TV. (Getting a place as a runner is very difficult, requiring you to be very fast or very lucky to have your name pulled out of the proverbial hat, unless you are doing it for charity.) But for a friend of mine, Mike Peace, it was a big deal. Mike was (and still is) one of the 'Ever Presents': the handful of men who have run every single London Marathon since it started in 1981.

When October came, the organisers decided only to have an elite event in London, running around St James Park. But what were the Ever Presents going to do? Like thousands of other people, they did the fortieth London Marathon as a virtual race. Everyone who paid to take part downloaded an app to measure their performance. Everyone chose their own route. Mike decided to start in Moretonhampstead but neglected to mention it to me in advance. My wife, Sophie, told me about it as we were heading to bed the previous night. Reading from her phone, she told me, 'Mike says on Facebook he's starting in Moreton and he'd welcome some support, especially if anyone feels like doing some of the run with him.' She showed me a picture of the map of his intended route.

Well, I thought to myself, if he's starting in Moreton, I have simply got to be there to wish him well. I'll run the first four miles with him, down to Lustleigh.

Next morning there was a small crowd in the carpark to see Mike off, including one other runner: a friend of his from Lustleigh. The three of us ran down to Lustleigh together. When we arrived, there was a small crowd there too, and that was where his friend stopped. I felt I could hardly leave Mike to run on alone, especially with people watching, so I carried on for a bit, up past the house where he lives – where there was another group of people cheering – and on to Bovey Tracey, seven miles from Moreton, where he was due to meet his next running companion. I decided to stop there. However, when we met this new chap, Mike introduced me to him (as we ran) with such enthusiasm that I could not say goodbye without appearing rude. 'This is Dr Ian Mortimer, the famous historian…' Fifteen minutes of conversation about me and my books followed. By the time we'd done a resumé of my writing career, we were on Bovey Heath, and I had no idea which way was homeward. So I carried on, following Mike. Eventually we emerged on to a road that I recognised, about eleven miles from home. Then it started raining. I asked the new friend whether he was doing the whole of the rest of the marathon with Mike, and he replied no, only another five miles. So that sealed my decision: I'd accompany Mike the whole way. Running a further fifteen miles with Mike on what was officially his fortieth London Marathon was a far better prospect than walking home eleven miles in the rain, alone, and feeling that I'd abandoned him.

Hours later, at home, Sophie asked me where I had been. I explained what had happened. 'So, let me get this right,' she said. 'You ran a marathon out of politeness?'

Yes, that was pretty much it. Later, Mike gave me his 25th anniversary London marathon mug, as a memento of the occasion. It is behind me, on my mantlepiece, as I type this.

6 November 2021