

# The Examined Life



## So Little Done

**Theodore Dalrymple**

Monday Books

The Examined Life  
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# **The Examined Life**

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The unexamined life is not worth living.  
Socrates

Being party to the most intimate thoughts and feelings of patients is one of the privileges of medical practice. Recently a patient informed me that, though not an author by inclination, he had tried to write an account of his philosophy of life, which he hoped might be instructive to others. He brought this account with him to hospital and gave it to me, asking me to do my best to have it published. I agreed, and herewith fulfil my promise, appending extracts from his medical notes. I believe that the public interest justifies their publication, and in this case overrides the duty of confidentiality.

# 1

I'M DYING, AND I can prove it.

Not to my doctor, though. He insists that there's nothing at all the matter with me.

'If I'm not dying,' I said to him, 'how come I'll survive one day less for each day that I live?'

'We're all dying in that sense,' he said.

'That may be so,' I said, 'but it's no consolation to me. You've admitted that I'm right.'

'Anything else?' he asked, looking away from his computer screen for the first time. Doctors these days think they can learn more about their patients from looking at their computers than by looking at their patients themselves – let alone by examining them. 'A sprained ankle, perhaps?' he added.

He's admitted that I'm dying, and he asks me about my ankles! Talk about fiddling while Rome burns! I got up to go.

'I can see that you're not interested,' I said. 'My death will mean nothing to you.'

I reached the doctor's door without a reply. No doubt he thought of one after I had gone.

On the way home, I bought a newspaper. I do so on alternate days. In that way I combine the advantages of maintaining an interest in the world, which research has shown to reduce, or slow the rate of development of, Alzheimer's disease, with those of ignoring the news, which has been demonstrated to reduce the incidence of depression, that is to say research has shown that people who pay attention to the news are more depressed than those who don't.

But which newspaper to buy? The ink of some of them rubs off on to the skin more than others, and might be, indeed probably is,

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carcinogenic. Can you really afford to wait until the studies have been completed? It is very unlikely, after all, that newspaper ink could do your skin any good; man evolved long before there was any ink in the world, and has not had time to adapt genetically to its presence. Therefore, it is better to play safe and buy a newspaper whose ink doesn't rub off, or at least rubs off less than that of others: most carcinogenesis is dose-dependent.

Unfortunately, the headline that caught my eye – 'Fish Oil Cancer Scare' – was in one of the inkier papers. But the story was a very important one, of course, because up until then fish oil had been good for you. If fish oil causes cancer, I would henceforth have to avoid fish, or at least oily fish.

Of course, I could probably, though not certainly, find the story online. But looking at computer screens is not without its risks. There is the bad posture that leads to backache, only partially counterbalanced by ergonomic furniture. No one wants to spend what might prove to be his last day with a backache. Many people get headaches when they look at a screen, and, though so far I have not, there must surely be a first time. And goodness knows what invisible rays, yet to be discovered, emanate from the screen and scramble your neurones like an egg.

Here was the problem, then: on the one hand there was a medical story that might or might not have been of vital importance, depending upon its truth; on the other, was the dilemma of whether it was riskier to read the printed or the electronic version, if there was one. What was I to do?

I bent down to look a little more closely at the newspaper – there was a pile on the floor, where all the newspapers were arrayed. (Of course, I bent at the knee, not the back: I am always appalled when I see people bending at the back, careless of their own health and well-being. It seems to me grossly irresponsible of them, and I hope I shall

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not be thought uncharitable when I say that they almost deserve their backaches. The least the shopkeeper could do, if he had absolutely to place his wares on the floor, was to provide a large notice telling people to use their knees, not their backs, to pick them up.)

I was trying to establish whether the story was of such significance that I needed to read more than the first few lines.

The owner of the shop, a weedy Indian who was probably fed up with shoplifters but wouldn't have said anything had I been black, piped up that he was running a shop, not a library, and that if I wanted to read the newspaper, I should buy it. In a way, he was right, but as I handed over my money, I said, 'How do you know whether you want something until you know what's in it?'

The point was not to be right, but not to let other people trample on you. That kind of helplessness leads to disease: your aggression is turned inward by it. Not, of course, that I'm particularly aggressive, because aggression can lead to heart attacks and other serious conditions. You need a healthy medium.

The story about fish oil came from Russia. Forty thousand people who ate fish regularly were compared with the same number who didn't, and the fish-eaters had twice the risk of stomach cancer of the non-eaters, even when you controlled for alcohol intake. (I admit to being sceptical: how can you control for alcohol intake in Russia?)

Still, I was in the habit of eating herring or mackerel at least once a week, and now I would have to reconsider and modify my diet. One has not been given the powers of reason for nothing.

After buying the newspaper, I reached home. I live in a small block of flats, and I'm worried about the radon that the walls and fittings give off: that is, if they give off any. Nobody knows – or cares. Once I telephoned the Environmental Health Department of the local council, from whom I rent the flat, to find out, and after a prolonged message telling me that the department was there to make

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life safe for everyone, regardless of race, religion, gender or disability, and that my call might be monitored for training purposes, I spoke to someone with a disability, namely an inability to follow a logical argument.

‘I’m worried about the radon from my walls,’ I said, when this human voice eventually appeared at the other end of the telephone.

‘I have to ask you a few security questions first,’ she replied.

‘Security questions?’ I said.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

‘What for?’ I asked.

‘It’s our procedure.’

She seemed to think that she had given a completely satisfactory answer.

‘But what if your procedure isn’t right, or isn’t necessary? What if it wastes a lot of time?’

‘It’s you who’s wasting time,’ she said. ‘Are you going to answer my questions or not? If you don’t, I’ll have to hang up. What is your mother’s maiden name?’

Of course I gave in. The danger from radon was more important to me than winning an argument. But I don’t think she had heard of radon or its dangers.

‘What makes you think you’ve got radon?’ she asked.

‘Everyone’s got radon,’ I said. ‘It’s everywhere. The question is, How much?’

‘Let me rephrase the question, then,’ she said, as if talking to a mental defective. ‘What makes you think you have too much radon in your flat?’

‘I don’t know that I have too much radon in my flat,’ I said. ‘That’s the whole point. But I do have a granite fireplace, put in by the last tenant, and granite is known for radon. I want you to measure it. I don’t want the first evidence of it to be cancer of the lung.’

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‘Do you smoke?’ asked the woman at the other end of the telephone.

‘No, of course not,’ I said. What did she take me for? ‘I’m not suicidal. But radon gives you cancer even if you don’t smoke.’

‘I’ve never heard of that,’ she said, as if that were evidence of the untruth of what I said, rather than of her ignorance.

‘In Cornwall and Northumberland,’ I said, ‘they found that people who live in granite houses and didn’t smoke had a higher incidence of lung cancer than people who lived in brick houses, and that was because of the radon.’

‘That’s news to me,’ she said.

‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘There’s nothing I can do about it. I mean, I can’t come round and remove your fireplace, can I? For all I know, it’s a listed building.’

A listed building? I was talking about life and death, and she was concerned about our architectural heritage! Anyway, my flat is not exactly a national treasure or an heirloom, more like a millstone round my neck. I’d like to live somewhere else, somewhere healthier, but I can’t afford to move. My life is one long irony: I can’t work to accumulate money to live somewhere healthy, or at least less unhealthy, until I’ve secured my health, and I can’t secure my health until I live somewhere less unhealthy. The problem is that life is a precondition of everything else, and health is a precondition of life. That is why my health must always come first.

I brought my conversation with the woman at the Environmental Health Department to an end.

‘Can you do anything about my radon or not?’ I asked.

‘We don’t deal with radon,’ she replied. ‘We’re more rats and cockroaches.’

‘Thank you very much for all your help,’ I said, putting as much sarcasm into my voice as possible.

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‘You’re welcome,’ she said. ‘We’re here to help. We’re part of the council’s Serving You Better campaign.’

I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised at her utter indifference to my health. After all, if even my doctor’s not interested in it, why should she be? You’re on your own in life, that’s what life has taught me, and you have to look after your own health. No one else will do it for you.

Anyway, I returned home after my pointless visit to the doctor. Mrs Green, my next door neighbour, was returning with her shopping at the same time.

Mrs Green is a widow, and I’m not surprised, the things she eats and presumably gave to her late husband to eat. She is practically a murderer, as well as a suicide. She’s seventy-five, overweight and crippled with arthritis. What’s more, she smokes, though I’ve succeeded in giving her a bad conscience about it.

‘What’s the point in going to the doctor,’ I said to her (she is always going), ‘if you go on abusing yourself like that?’

‘I know, dear,’ she replied. ‘But a little bit of what you fancy does you good.’

‘Not if what you fancy is smoking, it doesn’t,’ I said.

‘But I enjoy it.’

‘Think of your lungs, your heart, your whole body. They’re not enjoying it. Black tar is clogging up your lungs even as we speak. No wonder you’re out of breath all the time.’

‘I know you’re right,’ she said. ‘But at my time in life...’

‘You could live another fifteen years if you looked after yourself properly,’ I said.

‘It’s lonely without Bert,’ she said.

‘Bert might still be here if...’

I know I shouldn’t have said it, perhaps it was cruel, but it just slipped out, I couldn’t help it. The fact is that I’m addicted to the

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truth, and fatalism about health makes me angry. The truth will not only set you free but help you to live longer. Ignorance is death.

Mrs Green had her shopping bags with her. I could see a lot of plastic packaging peeping out, of the type that had a lot of oestrogenic chemicals in it. I tried some time ago to interest her in the dangers of these, but she said that she was a woman anyway, so feminising hormones were good for her and anyway she was too old to worry about them.

‘The older you are, the more you should worry about them,’ I said. ‘A rational man worries about things in proportion to the danger. The older you are, the greater the risk of developing cancer.’

‘When you’ve lived as long as me, love,’ said Mrs Green, ‘you don’t care no more.’

How irresponsible, immoral even! Who says it is only youth that is careless? The problem with old people is that they think that they have paid their dues, and that they can therefore do anything they like, with the right to be looked after, irrespective of whether they’ve brought their illnesses on themselves by their disregard of the most elementary precautions.

I looked a little more carefully into Mrs Green’s shopping bags. What was the first thing I saw? A packet of pork pies! Salt and fat incarnate!

‘Look at all that salt and fat!’ I said to her, hardly able to control myself.

‘Where?’ she said, looking down. Was she just feigning ignorance and stupidity, or were they real?

‘Those pork pies!’ I said. ‘They’re deadly. They fill but they do not nourish.’

‘Pork pies? I’ve been eating them for years. love.’

‘Precisely,’ I said, dryly. Is it not strange how people, when accused, often admit to aggravating circumstances as if they were mitigating?

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‘Those pork pies will kill you in the end.’ (Sometimes it is necessary to use dramatic language to make one’s point, without, of course, straying from the truth.)

She opened her eyes wide.

‘What’s wrong with them?’ she asked.

‘What’s *wrong* with them? What’s *right* with them, you mean? They go straight to your arteries and clog them up – among other things.’

‘They’re not poisoned, are they?’ She was beginning to look suitably alarmed now.

‘Only by the food industry,’ I said. ‘Actually, though they’re not poisoned, they *are* poison.’

‘Because them terrorists wouldn’t stop at nothing, would they? Glass in your pork pies – I wouldn’t put it past them.’

‘Terrorism!’ I said. ‘I’m sick of hearing about it. I’m not in favour of terrorism, of course: even if you survive an attack you can suffer from severe problems, both physical and psychological, afterwards. But the psittacosis that you can catch from parrots probably kills more people in a year than terrorism. And who’s afraid of parrots? Why can’t people get their priorities right?’

I think this was a little too difficult for Mrs Green to follow, so I put the matter in concrete terms.

‘Don’t you realise,’ I said, ‘that you’re twenty thousand times more likely to die of heart disease than of terrorist attack? You’ve been poisoned by the food industry all your life.’

‘Poisoned? Why?’

‘For profit, for money,’ I said.

‘Well,’ she said, ever dim, ‘I can’t see why. I mean, I haven’t got nothing worth taking.’

Literal-mindedness and concrete thought: these are the great enemies of the ideal, namely health.

‘They don’t want to poison you personally, in your capacity as Mrs

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Green,' I said. 'They want to poison *everyone*. They're not interested in *you*, they're interested in *us*.'

She looked relieved at this: some people are concerned only with themselves, and the rest of humanity might as well not exist for them.

'I keep myself to myself,' she said. 'I don't bother no one, so I don't see why anybody should want to poison me.'

I changed tack.

'I see you haven't brought any fresh fruit or vegetables again,' I said.

'They're difficult to peel and eat,' she said defensively. 'And digest. They repeat on me.' Guilt was written all over her face; she knew she was rationalising. 'You see, my hands... artheritis,' she added, her voice trailing away, as very well it might, considering that she didn't even pronounce the name of her condition correctly.

'It's a vicious circle, Mrs Green, a vicious circle. First you get arthritis because you don't eat properly, then you don't eat properly because of your arthritis.'

'Some of them prepared meals are very tasty,' she said, any port being good in a storm.

'I'm not talking about taste, Mrs Green, I'm taking about health. *Your* health,' I said, raising my voice for emphasis.

'Yes, well...'

'Yes, well what?' I could see I had her at an advantage now. 'There's no real reason why you couldn't buy ready-chopped vegetables, is there?'

'No, I suppose not, but they're expensive.'

'Or fruit?'

'No.'

I pitied her poor bowels. They had so little to work on other than semi-cooked, pre-digested, soft junk: a real rope of sand. I shuddered to think about the state of her colon.

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‘Anyway, love,’ said Mrs Green, obviously embarrassed by the exposure of her own irresponsibility, ‘it’s been lovely talking to you, and I wish I could go on, only I’ve got these varical veins and they begin to play up if I stand too long.’

‘Did you know,’ I said, ‘that diets low in vegetable fibre cause varicose veins?’

‘And I’ve got to feed the cat,’ she added.

‘Haven’t you heard of toxoplasma,’ I said, in a way halfway between a question and an exclamation. ‘You get it from cats.’

But she had opened the front door and slipped inside – on reflection, she’d been searching for her key for a little while.

## 2

IF MRS GREEN hadn't scurried away in that guilty way, like a thief in the night, I would of course have informed her of the evidence of the connection between low-fibre diets and varicose veins. In Africa, for example, where people eat a lot of roughage (admittedly because there is not much else for them to eat), even old people don't get varicose veins, however much of their lives they've had to spend standing up in the bush and so forth. The reason for this – I don't see any reason to be squeamish about it, because we're talking about a perfectly natural process here – is that they do not have to push down so hard to expel their waste matter, which is soft, bulky and malleable like an elephant's (varicose veins, incidentally, are known only to humans, so that one might almost call them the defining feature of humanity), and so the pressure in the veins in their legs – I'm talking now of Africans, not elephants, although of course the same argument applies – is not raised so high that it blows the valves, as it were, although actually I am speaking literally now, and varicose veins develop, together with varicose eczema and then ulcers.

In a very important sense, then, Mrs Green's condition was self-inflicted, though she didn't fully realise it. Ignorance is no excuse for an unhealthy lifestyle, however, and I still feel it is my duty to lay the truth before her and all those like her. What they do with the truth, of course, is up to them, and I have to admit that my success rate is not very high, such is the frivolity of most of the population. But at least I do not have to reproach myself when they develop precisely the conditions that could have been predicted from their lifestyle, such as heart attacks and bowel cancer. At least I have done my best for public health.

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Of course, my conscience wouldn't have allowed me to simplify matters too much, or at least not unduly. I would have had to tell her that not all vegetables and fruit were equal, and that she would have to pick them with care, and that most of those she would buy in the supermarket were contaminated with all kinds of artificial fertilisers, fungicides and insecticides, to say nothing of hormones. Many of these things could be presumed to be carcinogenic.

This is not to say, however, that fruit and vegetables grown without all these chemicals are safe in any absolute sense; far from it, risk cannot be avoided as easily as that. Naturally-occurring fungi, for example, contain or secrete some of the most powerful carcinogens known. It is all a question, at least in the present state of knowledge, and until entirely risk-free food can be produced, of balancing risks, and of estimating and acting upon whichever poses the least such risk, though this does not mean we should cease to strive to eliminate risk altogether. In the meantime, all vegetables should be washed – and I don't mean just rinsed – several times in strongly-running water before they are even cooked, let alone eaten.

Unfortunately, as I know from the experience of talking to her every time I see her, Mrs Green doesn't have any concept at all of relative risk. For example, she'll lock her front door with three mortise locks in an almost religious fashion, but she'll consume saturated fatty acids until they come out of her ears, even though she's much more of a candidate for a heart attack than for a break-in and assault. Don't get me wrong: I'm not against three mortise locks, in fact I think five would be better, because break-ins do occur and old ladies are attacked in their homes, but I just wish she would apply precautions in proportion to the risk. It is all very discouraging really; but still I do my best.

I opened the door to my own flat and closed the door quickly behind me, checking that none of my fingers was in the way and putting on the chain. I noticed at once that there was a letter on the

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floor just inside the door. It was a brown manila envelope: something official, then.

I did not pick it up straight away, impulsively, but went to fetch my letter-opening gloves, that is the transparent disposable gloves that I use to handle anything of whose provenance I cannot be certain. It always amazes me that people who would not open an e-mail on their computer from a stranger because it might contain a virus take absolutely no precautions when they receive a letter. Are their computers more precious to them, then, than their lives?

For the last few years I have also used a mask, ever since the anthrax scare in America made me realise what I should have known before, that germs don't just stick to objects but can be transmitted from them in the air. For example, when you lift a letter – bending your knees, of course, not your back – you cannot help but create a current of air, and because bacteria are so small, any current of air, no matter how slowly and smoothly you try to move, must be able to carry them into the general atmosphere: and not just by ones or twos, but by the hundreds of millions. A mask, therefore, is essential equipment when lifting or in any way handling unwashed objects.

Of course, when I first put on my surgical mask in shops and supermarkets both staff and customers were wary of me. They looked as though they thought that I had come to rob the shop, and actually expected me to draw a gun. All I had in my pocket, it goes without saying, was an anti-bacterial spray, which I confess might have looked a little like a gun when in my pocket, but which I used very sparingly and only when absolutely essential, for fear of damaging the ozone layer, which might – no, let us not equivocate, which *would* – increase one's chances of developing a skin cancer. I have quite pale and delicate skin, and it is one of the things that I have against my mother that she let me play outside in the sun when I was a child and knew no better, without anything to protect me from the ultra-violet. I didn't

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know there was anything wrong with this at the time, I had not yet reached the age of responsibility for one's health, and so I think she was culpably careless of my health. What is a parent for, if not to protect a child from danger? And early sun means early cancer.

I remember very clearly the first time I donned a surgical mask at a supermarket. The girl at the checkout counter pressed her bell to call the manager. You could see on her face that she was a girl of limited intelligence and information, with a slightly pendulous lower lip and the eyes of a sheep. Almost certainly she read those magazines that contain snippets about the lives of so-called celebrities, as if they were more real or important to her than her own, and whose only items about health were ridiculous testimonies to the healing power of onions and such like (not, of course, that I deny the healthiness of onions of the right sort). I wouldn't mind betting that she was a devotee of horoscopes as well.

Some people think that horoscopes are innocent superstition, but not I. The fault, dear Brutus, lies in ourselves, not in our stars, that we are susceptible to illness. Instead of actively taking sensible precautions to preserve oneself, horoscopes encourage fatalism of the most unscientific kind. How many people have uttered the most terrible sentence in our language (most terrible because it has been responsible for more unnecessary deaths than any other), namely 'When your number's up, your number's up?' Death is not a lottery, chosen at random; it is the result of frivolity and negligence. (I am speaking of most cases, perhaps not all.)

The manager of the supermarket came running, and alongside him two security guards dressed, I could not help noticing, in artificial fibre that does not allow sweat to evaporate. You would have thought it was an emergency. By the time they reached me, the manager, no taller than five feet three and weighing at least eighteen stone, was completely out of breath.

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‘Your body mass index is far too high,’ I said to him as he panted to recover his breath. ‘That’s why the slightest exertion tires you out. You need to do something about your index.’

‘What do you mean?’ he managed to gasp between two laboured inspirations.

‘Your body mass index,’ I said slowly and patiently. ‘Your weight in kilograms divided by your height in metres squared, that is to say multiplied by itself.’ (He didn’t look to me like a man familiar with mathematical concepts.) ‘If it’s over thirty, you’re obese. I hope you don’t mind me saying, as it’s only for your own good, but I think your body mass index is well over thirty, in fact it may be over forty.’

The manager, who had by now recovered a little, looked at me and said: ‘What are you, some kind of doctor or something?’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘Doctors are only interested in illness. I’m interested in health. You ought to look after yourself a bit better, in fact a lot better.’

The two security guards were leaning forward, trying to catch what I was saying. I admit that my voice might have been a little muffled because of the mask.

‘Why are you wearing that mask?’ one of them asked.

‘Germs, of course,’ I said. ‘They’re ubiquitous.’

‘You what?’ he said.

‘Ubiquitous – they’re everywhere.’

‘They are for us, too,’ he said, ‘and we’re not wearing masks.’

Exactly the same argument as the doctor uses when I raise the subject with him.

‘It was of no consolation to the victims of pneumonic plague during the Black Death that there were millions of other victims, was it?’ I said.

‘The Black Death?’ said one of the security guards to the other. ‘What’s he going on about?’

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I could see from their faces – brutal, devoid of ideas – that they would never be able to understand, so I turned to the manager, who had rivulets of sweat pouring down his face.

‘What did you have for breakfast, for example?’

‘Coffee, toast, a boiled egg... Look, we’re not here to talk about me.’

‘Was the coffee boiled?’ I asked.

‘Was the coffee boiled? What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘You sell coffee to the public and you don’t know? You don’t issue a warning? Boiled coffee raises your cholesterol whereas when it’s not boiled it doesn’t.’

‘That’s the first I’ve heard of it. Anyway, it’s got nothing to do with me. You’re frightening my staff with your mask.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ I said. ‘They’re surrounded here by every unhealthy food known to man and I wager you allow them to buy it at reduced prices as compensation for their miserable wages. It’s their diet they ought to be frightened of, not a mask that would protect them from harm if I were suffering from a contagious pulmonary, that is to say lung, disease.’

I put in the word ‘lung’ because I thought the girl at the till would understand it.

The manager, forced to see sense, turned polite.

‘I think, sir,’ he said, ‘you should just pay for your things and go.’

I handed my credit card to the girl with sheep’s eyes and entered my number in the machine, having first put on a disposable glove. I wiped the card on one side with a propyl alcohol-impregnated tissue when she handed it back to me. Of course, I couldn’t wipe it on the side with my signature because it would come off and probably damage the strip (an enquiry to the credit company on this very point went unanswered). But it is better for a card to be half-clean than wholly dirty, since most infectious diseases are transmitted in

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proportion to the number of bacteria consumed or breathed in or entering via blemishes in the skin, such as we all have.

When I took off my glove, I asked whether they had a special container for biological waste.

‘You should get one,’ I said to the manager when he told me that they had not.

My mask occasioned no further alarm on subsequent excursions to the supermarket. Familiarity breeds respect; it is not true that a prophet is without honour in his own shopping centre.

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