

called O'Brien "the most gifted woman now writing in English." When her first novel, "The Country Girls," was published, in 1960—it told the story of a pair of best friends from the sticks, "brazening it out in the city"—the postmistress in Tuamgraney told O'Brien's father that she deserved "to be kicked naked through the town." (After her mother's death, O'Brien found the copy that she had sent to her hidden in a pillowcase, with the racy passages blotted out.)

"Everyone in my family, if not to say my neighborhood, and stretching to my country, opposed my writing, because they associated it with dalliance, with sin, and with shame," O'Brien recalled. Her mother was her most piercing inquisitor. "She loved me and genuinely feared for my immortal soul—those are words from another era, but I cling to them." She went on, "She would've loved for me to be a hotel receptionist or an air hostess, because she somehow connected them with morality." O'Brien was dressed in a long velvet skirt and a shirt with a high white collar. Her lipstick (Train Bleu, by NARS) was the same color as some gentians in a pot on the windowsill. "I don't like interrogation anymore," she said, straightening. "I feel I've had enough of it."

In "Country Girl," O'Brien uses the frame of memory to crop the commonplace out of life. She loses her virginity in a field outside Dublin, but recalls "the damp of the grass, a diamanté hair slide that I had lost, the peas that kept slipping off his fork." She renders her mother's predicament, as the anxious wife of a feckless alcoholic, in three words: "She rarely sat."

O'Brien has lived in London for fifty years. "It takes a lifetime, coming to terms with, or accepting the veracity, that one is an exile," she said. "Even though you might want to leave the bloody backwater, the loss is only counted and reckoned in retrospect."

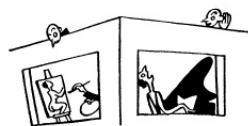
She continued, "To have no literature, I'm not recommending it, but to have had a taste of it vis-à-vis the Gospels, the Old Testament, and mythology—my appetite for books was whetted. 'James Joyce' was the first book I ever bought; that has been my little bible." She plucked a yellow book, worn to corn silk, from a bookcase. It was "Introducing James Joyce," by T. S. Eliot. The title page bore an inscription in her hand: "Edna

O'Brien. A book that taught me more than any other about writing. Purchased for less than six pence in Bachelors Walk in 1950 or 1951."

O'Brien said, "A lot of memoirs end in catharsis. They're hunky-dory with their mother and father, their sister and brother, and I feel that's imposed. You're alone with yourself, and your writing, and the feeling of one's mind fraying, from a lot of things—the weight of time, the wailing of the foxes." On the last page of O'Brien's book, she turns on a red lamp.

—Lauren Collins

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPT. MINI DINNER



Depending on how you count, Graham Hill's micro-apartment, in SoHo, has either six rooms or one. The other night, a dozen people gathered in them/it for a dinner party. "This is the first time I've had apartment envy for a place even smaller than my own," one of them whispered.

Hill is thin and rangy, with reddish hair and a reddish-brown beard. In his mid-twenties, he founded a Web-consultancy firm, which a few years later he sold for some ten million dollars. In his mid-thirties, he created the Web site TreeHugger, which he sold for another ten million dollars. Hill is now forty-two, and the micro-apartment, in addition to being his home, serves as a showroom for his latest venture, which he calls LifeEdited. The idea behind LifeEdited is to make scaling back in the face of ecological catastrophe seem attractive. Hill hopes to convince Americans (and anyone else who might be persuaded) that living in a small space with very few possessions is not only greener but also more fun. He envisions whole buildings—indeed, entire neighborhoods—made up of diminutive apartments and shared stuff.

"We want to design compelling places to live that are really smart financially and really smart environmentally and have a sense of community," he said. Each LifeEdited building, he imagines, will include "a communal professional kitchen or a

roof deck or a co-working office. You could have bookable spare bedrooms—Zipcar-ify the guest room. There could be something like a product library, so, for example, instead of everyone owning a drill you would have five amazing drills that everyone can access."

Hill's apartment—so far the only micro-apartment that's been completed—is roughly a rectangle, about twenty-four feet by sixteen feet. It doesn't have room for a coffee table, or for more than one couch, so for a while everyone stood around, drinks in hand. Once the last guest had arrived, Hill gave a micro-tour. He lowered a sleek, twenty-first-century Murphy bed from the wall behind the couch: the living room became a bedroom. He pulled out a drawer with a work surface, and it became an office. He slid the opposite wall forward along a set of tracks embedded in the floor; this created a second bedroom, with Murphy-style bunk beds. He took two steps, which put him in the middle of the pint-sized kitchen. The guests were blocking the path to the bathroom, but Hill mentioned that there was a shelf that folded down over the toilet, so that the space could serve as a teeny den. "If you're a couple, and one of you wants to make a private phone call or meditate, you can kind of get away," he explained.

A small counter covered with wine bottles turned out to be the dining-room table. It expanded, like an accordion. Stackable chairs were produced from a closet, and everyone sat down to eat.

"What totally blows me away is that it doesn't feel cramped," one of the guests, Karena Albers, a filmmaker, said. Another guest, Paul Hawken, the author of the book "Natural Capitalism," which Hill cited as one of his inspirations, noted that in Tokyo the micro-apartment would be considered macro: "This is capacious compared to Japan."

In keeping with the aims of LifeEdited, Hill has only twelve plates; these have deep rims, which allows them to double as bowls. There was a pause between dinner (a fennel-and-orange salad followed by pasta with broccoli rabe) and dessert (an apple tart) so that the plates could be washed and passed around again. Hill acknowledged that some might find the delay onerous, but, he said, he liked it: "It makes things more sociable."

As a celebration of pared-down living,

the dinner proved its point. It had, everyone agreed after every speck of the tart had been eaten and many of the wine bottles emptied, been a lovely party. As Hill was folding up the table to make room for his bed, he said that he had a lot of ideas about how to make entertaining even more efficient. For instance, instead of different types of glasses for hot and cold drinks he thought that he might try to design a hybrid glass that could be used for both. He believes it should be possible to come up with an "elegant spork." And, if he replaced the stacking chairs with benches, he could squeeze in even more people. He was already considering another sit-down dinner, perhaps for fourteen.

—Elizabeth Kolbert

BACKSTORY IRISH SPIRIT



Chris O'Dowd, the star of "Family Tree," Christopher Guest's new series on HBO, about a man on a journey of genealogical discovery, has been thinking about his own family history. "My dad found out that my great-grandfather was a bigamist," O'Dowd, who is thirty-three, recounted the other day. "He was a travelling salesman and he had a family in Birmingham, England, as well as a family in Ireland. I looked into it, and George O'Dowd, who's Boy George, has family from Birmingham. I mentioned to him on Twitter that we could be illegitimate cousins, and he liked the idea of it."

O'Dowd was in New York to celebrate his nationality. Like Conan O'Brien and Jimmy Fallon before him, he'd been chosen as the recipient of the Jameson Irish Spirit Award, presented annually by the American Ireland Fund. As Irish and Irish-American young professionals mingled at a cocktail reception in the lobby of Capitale, in Chinatown, O'Dowd, dressed in a slim-cut gray suit and sipping Irish whiskey, worked the room with his wife, the English writer and television presenter Dawn O'Porter. (She took on the O' when they married.) They made their way down a table of items being auctioned off for charity, pausing to giggle

over a pair of socks printed with green shamrocks, field compliments—"The episodes on 'Girls,' phenomenal"—and oblige requests: "Could we get a wee picture with you?"

"Ah!" O'Dowd said, as they came to a signed photograph of the English-Irish boy band One Direction. "Niall Horan is actually from close to where I'm from." "And we know Harry Styles a bit," said O'Porter, whose angular bob was set off by an ankle-length black vintage dress and platform pumps. She went on, "I saw him recently, and he said, 'You're married to the king of Ireland.' I said, 'Does that make me the queen of Ireland?,' and he said, 'No, that just makes you English.'"

Unlike Christopher Guest, who holds hereditary British peerage as the fifth Baron Haden-Guest ("Family Tree" is based on his experiences), O'Dowd stakes no claim to nobility. He does, however, trace his roots back to the O'Dowd clan, who held some twenty castles until they were seized by Oliver Cromwell in the seventeenth century. Last year, O'Dowd tried to buy one that still stands not far from Boyle, the small town where he grew up. "It sounds a lot more regal than it is," he explained. "It's just a lump of bricks, essentially."

O'Dowd bid on a photograph of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin having a drink, then he and O'Porter proceeded to Capitale's ballroom, where the award ceremony was beginning. After a step-dancing performance, Peter Ryan, Ireland's deputy consul-general to New York, accepted a community-service award for his efforts in the Rockaways after Hurricane Sandy. In his speech, Ryan joked that he was really there because his wife wanted to meet O'Dowd. (She wasn't the only one: "I think he's a hunka-hunka!" Frank McCourt's widow, Ellen, said.)

O'Dowd took the stage. "The only thing that comes to mind when I think of Irish spirit is a man called Joseph Moran," he said, and went on to tell the story of an Irish laborer who immigrated to London in 1968, where he lived upstairs from a pub. One night, the story went, Moran went down to have a drink, only to find a sign that read, "No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish." So he worked hard and saved, and, after fifteen years, bought the pub. "He still runs it," O'Dowd said. "And the pub is called the Black Dog." The audience roared with laughter. "I'd like to raise a

toast for Joseph Moran and all of the Joseph Morans," O'Dowd said. He raised his glass, "To my Uncle Joe!"

When the din had quieted, O'Dowd continued, "Can't pigeonhole the Irish very easily, but, more than anything, we're storytellers." He paused, thumbing his beard. "I don't have an Uncle Joe. There is no pub called the Black Dog."



Chris O'Dowd

I'm just a kid from Boyle, in Roscommon, standing in the middle of New York, telling a story. And the fact that you're giving me an honor tonight shows the Irish spirit in all of you." Pat Tully, the evening's m.c., took the mic. "Chris O'Dowd, ladies and gentlemen!"

Offstage, a rosy-cheeked woman tapped O'Dowd on the shoulder. Her name was Una Moran, and she had grown up down the road from him in Boyle. "I'm back more than I have been in years," O'Dowd told her—a result of the production schedule for "Moone Boy," the Irish TV series, based on his childhood, which he writes and stars in. "I stay with Mam when I'm home."

Moran and O'Dowd reminisced about one of his sisters, who used to hold him down and spit in his mouth, and then it was time for O'Dowd to go; he and O'Porter had to catch an early flight. He'd been outbid on the Sinatra photo, but he wouldn't leave empty-handed: the Spirit Award was memorialized by a heavy cut-crystal bowl. "That's where I'll keep the fish!" he said.

—Hannah Goldfield