



FIRASS DIRANI

By Kristina Foster

"In 2010 I went back to our village in Lebanon where my father worked as a child herding sheep. I saw the tiny room where my father lived with his 11 brothers and sisters. It was an inspirational moment to understand what my father overcame."

Firass Dirani sits across from me in a buzzing Balmain café, hoeing into a huge plate of egg white scramble, haloumi, spinach, tomato and avocado, washing it down with a jam jar of a leafy green concoction. He is explaining his fitness regime of martial arts, weights and running; his tanned limbs have "length in the muscle not stockiness", I am told. (My order of a lonely cappuccino feels at once pudgy and old-fashioned.)

Dressed in a white t-shirt and laidback jeans, Firass (pronounced fear-ahss) projects an impish charm; engaging you with elastic tales and goofy accents. An inner west yummy mummy tries not to stare as she collects her morning coffee. From the prolonged stary-eyed glance, I can see she was wishing the handsome actor was her real life house husband. (Dirani plays beefcake Justin Baynie on the Channel 9 series *House Husbands*.)

Dirani has always known he would be an actor. "As a kid I was always entertaining my family. Sometimes I used to dress up as a girl. I'd create different personalities." Dirani suddenly slips into a drag queen tone, demonstrating one of his invented childhood characters. He describes her as a classy girl with a bit of a rough edge - and he pulls it off very believably.

As a teen he worked as a check-out operator at his dad's convenience

store in Blacktown. "I'd be unpacking bread, bagging groceries, sweeping the floor while I memorised lines for the local play. Customers thought that I hadn't taken my medication!"

Dirani attended St. Pauls Grammar, a relatively posh school in Sydney's west, where he was often in trouble for playing the class clown, a strategy he admits he used mainly to get girls to kiss him. "My principal once took me aside and asked me what I wanted to be when I left school. When I told him I wanted to be an actor he paused then repeated, 'No really, what do you want to be?' I'd love to see him again and remind him of what he said that day," he chuckles defiantly, that naughty kid still well and truly alive.

Dirani inherited his tenacity from his mother and father, who travelled by boat to Australia from Lebanon in 1969 without knowing a word of English. His father struggled to make a living to provide a good education for Dirani and his two older brothers. "In 2010 I went back to our village in Lebanon where my father worked as a child herding sheep. I saw the tiny room where my father lived with his 11 brothers and sisters. It was an inspirational moment to understand what my father overcame."

The day that Dirani received two life changing letters - one the entry

notice for Business Law at the University of Western Sydney and the other an acceptance letter into the prestigious performing arts school ACTT - is indelibly etched in his memory. "Time seemed to freeze. My parents really wanted me to do the law degree - there was a lot of shouting. But it was clear in my mind I had to do acting. I'd dreamt about it with such clarity. I knew it was the right path. But the tension it created between my parents and I lingered for a while."

Dirani is now living the dream, delighting his family and fans. He entertains his 15,000 twitter followers (@fizzfilm) with a mixture of inspirational quotes and slapstick videos of himself, re-enacting scenes from *Braveheart* in his living room and washing his car in his undies.

Not long after our chat, Dirani is heading off to Melbourne to shoot another season of *House Husbands* but before he leaves he has a third date with a girl he "really likes". He's cooking to impress and tells me what he is making: salmon, sweet potato puree and a kale salad with a slightly acidic dressing. He asks my opinion which seems odd; Dirani seems generally so confident of all his choices. I tell him whatever he does I'm sure the extraordinary effort he puts in will make it a winning combination, after all, that's what Firass Dirani does best.

Images courtesy of Peter Brew-Bevan.

