@Risk: Crossing Borders with Tareq Hadhad and Marcello Di Cintio

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Jodi: Hey, I'm Jodi Butts. Welcome to @Risk, brought to you by Interac.

Some borders are patrolled by agents or separated by oceans, while others are less well-marked. When the violence around the Haddad family in Damascus escalated, Tareq crossed the border of Syria into Lebanon with his family as refugees. Then Tareq left his family to immigrate to Canada in 2015. Today, Tareq is the founder of a thriving business, Peace By Chocolate, living in Nova Scotia with his family who soon followed him here. Tareq reflects with me on being in the business of happiness, the meaning of home, and successfully navigating crises.

Next I'm joined by Canadian award-winning travel writer Marcello di Cintio. Have you ever thought about how a taxi is a border of sorts? Marcelo has profoundly. He is the author *of Driven: The Secret Lives Of Taxi Drivers*. Taxi drivers are definitely entrepreneurs, like Tareq. But after speaking with Marcelo, I think few of them would suggest they are in the business of happiness. Whether it's the tale of Ique or the bully of Baghdad, Marcello reveals to us their complex and intriguing stories that we might not otherwise have been told, which often involve fleeing dangerous circumstances, if only to end up taking a seat behind the wheel.

Buckle your seat belts and get ready for a risky ride.

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Thank you for joining me Tareq, and welcome to @Risk.

Tareq: Thanks so much for having me. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

Jodi: So let's get right into it. You decided to come to Canada in the face of so many risks and so many unknowns. What made you decide that the risks of staying where you were were worse than the risks of coming to Canada?

Tareq: I go back to one of these sayings of my grandfather. He used to say that immigration is tougher than death. And at that time it was in 2005. Syria was a peaceful country; our family had a successful life. I was getting into medicine; my entire family were really getting their life path all figured out.

So when the war started in Syria in 2011, we just figured out that what matters at the end of the day is keeping the family safe and protecting them and making sure the kids in the family have a brighter future.

So in 2013 it was the year when our family decided to leave Syria in the first place, and it was not an easy decision. It was really one of the toughest decisions that our family had to take. And we became called refugees in Lebanon.

Now, when you are called a refugee, that means you lost your sense of belonging. You lost your identity. And it was something we did not want to be. No one is born to become a refugee, no one is born to become an immigrant.

So when we were as refugees, we decided that it is our chance right now to flip our life to a better future than what we were living as refugees with, honestly, not even an identity. We cannot go back to Syria; we cannot stay in Lebanon. It was like feeling stuck. Many Canadians right now during the pandemic would say that the only feeling they had in 2020 was that they were stuck. There was no opportunity for them to move, there was no opportunity for them to travel, there was no opportunity for them to do anything. Imagine being like this for years of your life, being as refugees.

So we certainly wanted to get the family out of Lebanon. We applied to go to any country that can open the doors for us. My application was to France, was to New Zealand, was to Australia. I applied to go to the US, that's before President Trump was a president. So I wanted to make sure that our family gets out of Lebanon.

And at that time there, Canada was honestly the only opportunity for me to travel here. So if I was to compare our life there in Lebanon, it was even tougher than being in a war. Being as a refugee means that you're counting down to death. You are losing years of your life without having your family members in schools. My father had to sign a commitment that he's not going to work in Lebanon. I could not start a business, and I could not go back to practice.

But at the same time I was volunteering with many organizations, because when you are a refugee you have two options. You can play the role of a victim, or you can play the role of a victor. I decided to take the second. I decided to play the role of a victor, even though we lost everything in the war. But we had our intellectual property, our talents, and our skills, and we wanted to help.

So by the end of 2014, the opportunity to come to Canada was on the horizon after a cab driver in Beirut on Christmas time in 2014. He was waiting for me, I was in the car with him for 30 minutes, he dropped me off at my parents place, and he told me all about Canada. He told me there's a scholarship at the Canadian embassy at that time for a program called WUSC, the World University Services Of Canada. And I had no idea that my life would change forever because of a cab driver, because of that cab ride that I took in in Beirut around Christmas time in 2014.

So the embassy of Canada in Lebanon invited me for the interview for the scholarship. I was not eligible for the scholarship, as I did not qualify. But then the embassy invited me and my family to come to Canada in 2015. And it took a long time. The process took a long time, between March 2015 until the commitment with the new government in 2015 to bring 25,000 Syrians to Canada.

So I was among the first planes. Honestly, I just left Beirut in early December, arrived in Toronto, and then this is how my life started. If I was to compare coming to Canada with being at risk as a refugee, immigration has its own challenges. But the moment that I

was on the plane from Beirut to Toronto on December 18th, 2015, I knew that I was going somewhere to keep me at peace, to keep me safe, and to keep my family as well. That they're living. They are continuing to have their bright future ahead of them.

This is this is the ultimate goal for each of the families, and to live in peace, and to have a brighter future, and to have kids in schools, and to rebuild what was lost in the war. And our story is just among really so many Canadian success stories. So we are so proud to be in this country of human rights, of freedom. Canada means a lot to us right now. It's the country that accepts immigrants and people from around the world regardless of our ethnicity, regardless of our background, we are welcome. Wherever we come from and whoever we are. And that's why we're so proud to be here.

Jodi: Well, it's such an incredible story. And I think all of us feel the joy that is imparted in the way you tell your story. I want to back up a little bit, because people might not appreciate that when your family first made the decision to leave Syria to go to Lebanon, you weren't even thinking that it would be permanent. You thought you might end up being able to go back to Damascus.

Tareq: That's correct. That's so true. The moment when we left Syria, it was like a temporary thing. It would be like a few months in 2013. The war would end in Syria and then we would go back, but there was no way back. Our entire ships back were burned, as they say. We did not have the opportunity to get back to Damascus.

At that time, to be honest, everything was destroyed in the world. What would we get back to? Our house that was stolen, then was burned and was destroyed, and was bombed by an air strike and by tanks on the street? Or get back to many of my friends who went missing, who were arrested, who were killed in prisons in Damascus? Or really go back to the factory, the second largest in the region that was bombed by the most powerful explosion in the Syrian war in 2012?

All the memories that we had back home in Syria were really painful. Home for us is not the place that we are only born in. Home for us and for our family is a place that offers us life and peace. And we certainly lost that sense of life. And even being in Syria at that time was a huge risk for us. At the same time, people don't know that the victims in the war at that time and continue to be were civilians. Those who did not want to become part of that war, those who just wanted to have peace and safety in their lives, and those certainly have paid that highest praise. Those who have lost their future, their presence.

And not one of them was born to become a refugee. As I mentioned, when you are born, no one comes to you and asks you, "What do you want to be in the future?" No one says, "I want to be an immigrant." No one says, "I want to be a refugee." This is something that you are forced to live. This is not a decision, it's not a life goal, it's not a passion. It's something that we are forced to live.

So it is certainly a great honor for our family to have been able to come to Canada and re-establish ourselves, and certainly not only be able to re-establish our business but also help other refugees and other immigrants as well re-establish theirs.

So at the same time when I think about Damascus after leaving in 2013, it just brings so many sweet memories. And that's the hardest part, right, in leaving your homeland. It's that sense of disconnecting. And when you disconnect from the country that you were born and you have your connections, your relationships, your connections with the family, I have- I had a big family in Damascus. There were around 60 of us living in one building in Damascus before the war, 6-0. So we're having the supper together every Saturday. Our building was really 10 floors in Damascus, the one we were living in.

And every Saturday, my grandmother used to invite us to have a supper with her. Imagine having a large giant table in your grandmother's house with 60 chairs on it, and you cannot miss a dinner with your family or you'll be kicked out of the building. So she has no tolerance for missing dinners with her. I was really lovely to have that sense of social cohesion and family safety at that time, and really telling stories and hearing a lot about the country and the history and the tradition.

Because Damascus is a very… Damascus is a very old place. It's an ancient city. It goes back thousands of years in history, and it was certainly an interconnection between all cultures in the middle east at that time. And even between Europe and Africa and all the ancient continents, the three ancient continents. So it was certainly a great place to be born in connecting the old world with the modern one.

And our building was on the middle between that modern area and the ancient one, so we knew about our history. My grandmother used to say, "You have to know where you came from to know where you are going." So when we were in Damascus, we always connected the dots between our history and our path forward. And it was absolutely a great place to be.

And I remember many Canadian tourists who were going back to Syria. Let me tell you a short story about Damascus as we are talking about it. So in 2008, this is how I really got to know about Canada. In 2008, I finished one of my trainings that I had in Damascus and I was on the public bus. And there was a Canadian man who came and was on the bus. He came and sat beside me. The guy at that time, he lost his paper, he lost his passport. He was, I think, a photographer. So I knew he lost all his papers, I know he did not really have any money. I took him with me to our house in Damascus and he spent one full month with us at the house, and we hosted him.

He really loved it. He loved the experience he loved knowing about the country, he loved that the sense of hospitality. And after one full month, me and my friends, we found his papers at one of the public gardens in Damascus. We gave it to him. The guy is from British Columbia, and he told us all about Canada at that time. But having no idea in 2008 we will host a Canadian man in our house, and then in 2016 Canadians will

host us in their houses and in their country. The law of reciprocity, this is exactly what happens.

So every time I tell the story when I think about Canada before coming here, the guy just comes to my mind. Because he really represents all the values that this country lives by every day.

Jodi: Now, you were studying to be a doctor just before you were forced to flee Syria. And you still held on to that ambition when you were in Lebanon. You assisted treating your fellow refugees, you came to Canada thinking you would still be a doctor. But now you're an entrepreneur. What have all of your experiences, how have that fed into your ideas about entrepreneurship and how to be successful at it?

Tareq: Certainly I was very passionate about medicine. My family had that passion about making chocolate and making happiness through chocolate. And I was very passionate about medicine because I was correlating medicine to chocolate. Because medicine seeks to diminish pain and chocolate seeks to raise happiness. So there's always that mutual common point that I talk about.

When I was in Lebanon and the reason why I applied to come to Canada in the first place was to continue my medical studies. So that scholarship did not work out and then the invitation came on the horizon for our family, and then we're so lucky to be accepted. So I landed in Canada on December 18th. I had big plans to go back to medicine for sure. That was I was one of the first things I wanted to do.

But then I landed in Nova Scotia the day after on December 19th, and coming from Halifax with this amazing group of Canadians who drove me from the airport to the town of Antigonish, they were the sponsors of our family, and they were BVOR. They didn't know us, they had no idea who we were, and they had no idea what we did in Syria. The only thing they knew was the size of our family and our last names and our first names. That's it.

So having the opportunity to meet these guys at that time, I realized that I have a lot to give back. This amazing group of people, like millions of other Canadians, they have done everything possible to make sure that refugees arrive here and they are safe and they have a bright future ahead of them. So the moment that I met these beautiful-hearted Canadians at that time, I'm like, I really want to give back to this amazing community and to this amazing country. And they started. They were at that time helping us with integration. They were broken into committees for employment, for education, for social activities, for financial management, everything. For housing, for clothing. And I'm like, how can I get back and give back to these amazing friends, my new family that I called them?

So I realized that going back to medicine was a really long path. I applied to go to many universities in the country, for sure. That was during January in 2016, during my first weeks in the country. And the response was just so frustrating. If you are an immigrant physician or if you were studying to become a physician outside, many universities in

the country, if not all of them, ask you to go back to do undergraduate degrees. Some of them ask me to do high school again. And I'm like, this is a waste of life.

I'm not going to sit down and complain and say that I can't do anything about it. No I'm, going to- I'm just going to switch for a while. Because my understanding at that time it was never too late to become a physician, but it might be too late to give back to Canada. So I started at that time talking to my family within there. The next business day actually that my family arrived in the country, the next day they woke up and were like okay, what are we gonna do? We're gonna restart our business. So they were really passionate about it.

And at that time, I heard from my friend in Toronto, he was like joking with me and he told me, "Do you know that if you are in Toronto and you had a heart attack it's safer to be in a cab in a taxi rather than being in an emergency room at the hospital?" I'm like, "Why? Why would you have a heart attack and you are in a taxi in Toronto?" It was like, "Because 70 of cab drivers in Toronto are immigrant physicians." So those physicians, they could not get back to practice. They had all these challenges on the roadblocks ahead of them.

And certainly I believe there's a really long way for us to go in the country to recognize and acknowledge these qualifications and credentials for many doctors and pharmacists and dentists and lawyers and engineers who come to Canada ready to join the workforce. But there are many roadblocks ahead of them.

At that time my main focus was to restart the business for the family. I knew how passionate they were about it, and I knew that as immigrants and refugees, we might have lost everything in the war, but we did not lose our skills and our talents. We did not lose the knowledge about how to make chocolate, right, we did not lose the knowledge about how we can distribute our products. We did not lose anything, honestly, after a while we had sat down and said, "In life you have two options. You can either sit down and complain and say that you can't do anything, or you can dig down and find solutions." So we started finding solutions.

The community has been a great help for us, and I'm sure you know better than me about Nova Scotia. It's a great place to be and the community here is just phenomenal. Really people, they're ready to help. We sent emails about some getting machineries and getting the business registered and getting a website up and running, and we had really many community leaders and community members just joining us to rebuild the business once again.

In entrepreneurship in Canada there were not too many challenges, as I mentioned. I take every challenge as an opportunity to grow the business, as an opportunity to grow as an individual. I had a lot of doors open for me, honestly, since I came to this country. Many blessings that I have so been so fortunate to live in. But at the end of the day I knew my family wanted to restart the business.

So I took the lead in the beginning. We got the family together in the home kitchen and we were like yeah, let's just get to it. So we started playing with chocolate recipes again in the home kitchen in Antigonish. At that time we were spending hours and hours staying up until like 3 am trying new recipes and giving away chocolates to our neighbors and our community and getting feedback. And it was really heartwarming just to know the joy we are putting on the faces. Many people in Antigonish, many people in Antigonish have been there for us, and we wanted to be there for them.

And one incident that changed the way I actually started looking at entrepreneurship as an opportunity to offer jobs. I was sitting in one of the coffee shops, and it was during my first weeks in Canada. And then someone was like, “Welcome to Canada.” But I think at that time one of the towns in Nova Scotia had massive loss in jobs. And there was really frustration about how Canada is bringing in many refugees while there's some- and that the rates of unemployment were rising in rural communities. That's what they were saying, that's what they were afraid of. And then he came to me and said, “Welcome to Canada, but why did you come here to take our jobs? We don't have enough for ourselves.”

I was really shocked to be honest. I went back to him, and he was really a kind man but I understand the insecurity, right, at that time for people who are afraid for their jobs. And I wanted to calm him, and I told him, “We did not come to Canada to take jobs. We came to Canada to create them.” And the guy, he kept in touch with us, and he was actually one of our first employees that we hired later on in 2016. So I realized that…

Jodi: That’s so great.

Tareq: Yeah, I realized that by being in the business community in Canada and entrepreneurship, it’s a great platform for immigrants to express their messages and their visions and their missions. And why do they want to make Canada a greater place to be in and leave the planet a better place for our kids in the future as well? That's really how my entrepreneurship journey started is just with a few pieces of chocolate at a potluck in Antigonish at that time. And entrepreneurship for me, certainly as Reed Hoffman once said, he was like, “Entrepreneurship is jumping off the cliffs and building a plane on the way down.” So we jumped off these cliffs in 2016 having no idea what can happen. We built that plane on the way down and now we are flying.

Jodi: That's so great. I want to pick up something that you've said in your previous answer and something I know that it's a real mantra for your father, which is chocolate must be made with happiness or it will suffer. So how do you commit to happiness, and then how do you scale happiness as the business grows and you have more employees. How do you scale that happiness to ensure the chocolate does not suffer?

Tareq: Yeah, absolutely. Well, it all goes back to… The origin of this story goes back to how my parents met in Damascus. That was 1987 during the first chocolate shop that my father opened at that time. And my mother stopped by my father's shop. She didn't know him at that time. She had a few hours before her flight to go see her family. And

my mother went to the shop and said, “Hi, can I get two boxes of chocolate?” And my father, he had ten boxes of chocolate stacked in the back shop, the best chocolate you can ever imagine. Dark chocolate, white chocolate, milk chocolate, with seeds and almonds and roasted hazelnut and pistachios and dried fruits and really amazing fillings and something very spectacular with the designs and decorations on top.

So my father made these few boxes and put them in the back for special guests. And he didn't know my mom at that time, but she told him she's going to see her family. So he went back, he grabbed two boxes of chocolate, gave them to her for free, and asked her to go see her family. And when you come back, please drop by here and tell me all about it.

My mother, actually, she was really surprised. She got two boxes of chocolate for free. So she took the boxes, she traveled to see her family. And then when she arrived there, she opened the two boxes, and my father inserted notes and then that said, “My name is Isam. I don't make chocolate, I make happiness.” So my mother was really struck by it. Like this is so lovely, imagine buying these, or not really buying, getting these two free boxes of chocolate, and then enjoying them with your family. And my mother keeps telling us that it was the best two chocolate boxes she has ever tasted ever.

So she came back to my dad and she bought the remaining eight boxes on the back shelf. My dad was a genius entrepreneur. He gave her two boxes for free, she came back for the eight and paid for them. So it was really incredible the way they tell their story until now, it just makes my heart dance. It's really amazing.

So the happiness that started with my dad, they really want to build that connection. And that's the reason how my mother actually and my dad fell in love. And then they got married a few months later. It just continues with every day.

So the happiness is one thing. Since we came to Canada we realized happiness is a connection between all of us human beings. It's something that we aspire to, it's something that everyone's seeking, the reason maybe why you are doing this podcast is because you are seeking happiness and making listeners happy and just spreading knowledge. Maybe you get satisfied and that satisfaction leads to your happiness. Everyone does something and do their own work for their own happiness. And that's why my family does what it does for the sake of happiness.

And when we arrived in Canada, we realized our message needs to be to Canadians about talking to them in a language that they will understand. Many immigrants come to new countries and they still get bubbled into their communities. For example, let's say we come from Syria, coming from Damascus. Many people are like, “Yeah I am in Toronto, let me just find my Syrian community.” And they just forget about the bigger picture, they just forget about that the bigger community that is there ready to listen to them and see their products and get their messages here.

So when we came to Antigonish, it was really apparent to us in the first potluck we went to that the community is there for us and they are really willing to support. Because they

believe as newcomers we have brought something unique and something special. So that's why they got really connected to our story in the beginning. Then they tried the chocolate and everyone was smiling, everyone's happy, and that's how we knew we are on the right path. We knew that chocolate is a universal language.

So happiness for us continued to be our compass, along with peace. You cannot build happiness without securing peace. And that's why we tied these two major values in our business together, which is certainly more than a business, It's a cause, into our core values. So happiness needs many elements to it. Happiness needs passion, happiness needs enthusiasm, happiness needs advocacy, happiness needs contribution, and happiness needs excellence. Without these five things you cannot build happiness.

And when we were putting together this amazing vision for our story and our brand in the country, we realized that these five pillars of happiness, they formed the word peace. Right? We talked about passion, enthusiasm, advocacy, contribution, excellence, these five, the first five letters of this word, they form the word peace. And that's how actually the brand came about is it just was a perfect match between our mission and at the same time believing that peace is the noblest value on earth that everyone should fight for. And chocolate is a product of happiness.

So we connected peace with happiness through chocolate and we continue to do that every day. And I hope that everyone who tasted the chocolate or listened to the story or read about our story or got our book, they got to have the same feeling for us. Because everything is certainly made with full love here in our facility in Antigonish, throughout all of our team members. They believe in what we believe, and that's really the core of our values.

Jodi: Before I let you go; you opened a flagship store in Halifax during the pandemic. How has the pandemic been for you and your family?

Tareq: Well the pandemic for us compared to the war has been a piece of cake, honestly. When I when I started comparing in March 2020 the feeling of staying at home when the orders and emergency alerts started going out, you know, stay home and stay safe, I was comparing what does it mean to be in a pandemic in Canada versus being in a war in Syria? And in the war, we have no option. If you stay home you will die. In a war, we were we were forced to leave our homes, and we were forced to leave everything behind after the war that tore my immediate family apart. In 2020 during the pandemic, we were asked to stay in our homes and we were asked to stay safe.

And I said I will take the second. I will take the pandemic, full stop, honestly. Because I knew what it means to be in a pandemic means that you're just staying home and waiting for the crisis to end. Don’t get me wrong, the pandemic has been really painful. It caused the death of thousands of Canadians and we mourn them every day, and we remember them every day. But certainly as human beings, we believe that there is resiliency in each of us. Resiliency in the face of adversity, resiliency in the face of struggles and challenges for every day.

The pandemic will not be the last challenge that we're going to face. There is a massive threat in the face of humanity, like climate change when you think about it. It's a disaster. So we believe that there are challenges coming ahead our way, and we have all to have that mindset of adapting and resiliency and fighting ahead for the values do we believe in.

And that's why we started fighting for peace, because we believe that the challenges coming for our planet are much greater than any war, any disaster, any catastrophe, any pandemic.

So for us as a family and the business during the pandemic, we realized that what did not kill us certainly made us stronger after the war. And getting into that mindset, enduring the pandemic has certainly helped our family to go through it. The pandemic has caused the closure of our factory for over three months last year. It was certainly not an easy decision to make, but we wanted to keep our staff safe. We wanted to keep them aligned with the brand. You cannot spread peace while you are putting your staff at risk. So we had to shut down for a few months until we had systems in place. We had to delay a lot of our plans. We had really major export planning for the company in 2020 to the United States and all across the world that were put on hold.

The idea behind developing the Halifax flagship store, we started that earlier last year. It was three- a few days after my citizenship ceremony. I got my citizenship on January 15th in 2020, so just really two months before the pandemic. I'm so glad for it. So the idea started right then. We wanted to have a place in Canada that carries 60 of our products, all of them, and add new products. And there's no place. Right now we distribute to over a thousand stores across the country. We sell online, we sell to many other chains. But we wanted to have a place where it carries all of our brands, all of our missions, all of our social impact throughout the peace on earth society, donations to Canadian Mental Health Association, to Indigenous communities, to homeless youth across the country, to refugees throughout our partnership with Refugee Hub. There is a lot to talk about. So we wanted to have that place as soon as possible.

And our brand, we are so lucky to be in Nova Scotia because people really have been following our success stories since the beginning. So we felt we had a responsibility during the pandemic. And chocolate always helps during comfort and troubling times, even during troubling times better, because it's a sweet product. So we started building that store in 2020. It was really a great project that we started working on with many organizations in the province.

We are in downtown Halifax. For those who don't know Halifax, we are right on the waterfront at the Queens Marque, the most modern place east of Montreal. So being there, just really an amazing opportunity to tell our story at the heart of Nova Scotia. We started developing the architecture of the store at the beginning of the pandemic, and we wanted to tell our story, we wanted to tell our heritage, and that's the beauty of Canada, right? Because when you arrive here, no one asks you to take off anything of your culture, of your heritage, of your tradition. You are welcome to bring those with you

and to keep those with you. And you are encouraged to teach your kids about where you came from, as I mentioned, because we know where we came from. And we wanted to know where we are going.

So yeah, honestly the pandemic has been an opportunity for us to grow. I know feeling stuck can be a setback for so many, but for us feeling stuck was an opportunity to grow. And we used that opportunity to share our gratitude and open our store as a reason for celebration during the time of sadness and troubling time. And I always hear about the pandemic that it certainly had many negative impacts on the economies, on families, people were really challenged to find new ways to connect and communicate. So we used that opportunity to bring another reason for happiness at the heart of the capital of Nova Scotia, which is Halifax.

Jodi: Tareq, thank you so much for joining me and for sharing your happiness with Canada. Proud to be a citizen with you.

Tareq: Thank you so much for having me, really honored to be on this podcast. Thank you.

[Music swells, then fades out]

Jodi: Well thank you for joining me, Marcello, and welcome to @Risk.

Marcello: Thank you so much, thank you.

Jodi: So tell me, what drives taxi drivers?

Marcello: Wow. I think what drives taxi drivers is what drives all of us. I think it's the need to try to live a complete life and to face the challenges of the places where we live. In that respect, the taxi drivers are the same as all of us, they're Canadians like the rest of us. What I sought to find out in this book though is what were they before they were cab drivers? And kind of define the back stories of these of these fascinating men and women who we share such intimate space with but never get to know.

Like if you think about the relationship between passenger and cab, it's really unique. Right? Because I can't think of another type of place where two strangers are such in in physical proximity to each other and yet exchange so little. And as a travel writer whose regular job is to go around the world and find people with interesting stories, it seems so strange that here I was so close to stories and kind of never crossed the border kind of between the front and back seats. And so that was the kind of the point of the whole project.

Jodi: What struck me, and all the stories are wonderfully told and are deeply interesting, was that there was this risk thread that ran through it. That many of the taxi drivers who you interviewed wanted to be in control of the risk. It's not that they were running away from it, but they wanted that degree of autonomy.

Marcello: That's a really- what an interesting observation. I haven't thought about it, but that's absolutely right. Here are these men and women, and mostly men, who have a job that they typically most of them don't like so much. But what they do enjoy about it is the autonomy and is the control. The ability not just to be behind the wheel literally, but also figuratively. These are people who have these jobs and are able to… I mean, they're essentially independent contractors, every cabbie. So they can stop driving and go visit family overseas if they want. They set their own hours as much as they can. And they have a, and I mean this with affection, they have this attitude of control too. They know more than you do about just about everything, especially about the city, about the city that they're in. And they're opinionated and sometimes brash. And yes, they are. They're certainly the lords of that front seat.

Jodi: And you describe taxis as borders, which I just found so interesting. Unpack that for us, why is a taxi like a border?

Marcello: So many ways. Think about the interfaces that exist in a cab, right? So you have the divide between a working class and every other kind of class. Right? There's no other place where a working class, and a worker, comes in comes into that close and lengthy proximity with every other kind of person, right, whether you're poor or rich, you'll find yourself in the backseat of a cab at some point. So there's that.

There's obviously the interface there between white space and brown space, brown and black space. Typically drivers are people of color, and so this is a place where people of different ethnicities and experiences meet. This is where the newcomer is interfaced with the person who's been here for a long time like myself, who have been here forever like myself. And so there's so many there's so many ways that tiny little space encased in in metal and glass, there's so many different borders that are there.

And there's an interesting border too, and this is what I thought about and wrote about in the beginning of the book about how there’s a certain story in silence. That there's this interface between story and silence. Because typically what we do, to our discredit but I do it also, is you get into the back seat of a cab. Maybe you blurt out your destination, maybe you exchange pleasantries, and then you disappear into the glow of your phone. And the ride is silent.

And the border I really wanted to cross in this book was on the other side of that wall of silence are these incredible life experiences, these incredible backstories of the men and women that drive us around.

Now, they don't always want to talk about it. I mean, the last thing I would want is for everyone to read my book, to jump in the backseat of a cab and pester their driver for their life stories, in fact they hate that. But if they're willing to talk, and a lot of them are as many of us have experienced in the backseat of cabs. There's only two kinds of drivers, those that don't want to talk and those who won't stop talking. And I was very fortunate to be in the presence of the latter for the purpose of this book, to cross over

that border from kind of cell phone silence in the back to learning of the lives of the people in the front.

And yeah, what the cab drivers have is this link to the wider population. And let's be fair, like so do a lot of other workers in a lot of other industries. The person who gives you your double double at Tim Hortons also may have come from a have an incredible back story and interacts on a daily basis with a greater community. But the intimacy between a client, like a passenger and driver or between those two people, is much greater within the cab just because of the physical proximity of it and the length of time. Picking up your coffee from the counter is not the same as spending 45 minutes in the back of a cab looking at your driver's eyes through the rectangle of glass of the mirror. That's an entirely different experience.

Jodi: Thinking about sort of the conversations we have or don't have with our taxi drivers, my husband worked in politics for a while. And he would always ask the drivers how did they think, how are things going in politics? And what was their top concern? And he always felt like well it maybe wasn't the largest sample size it was pretty good data.

Marcello: Yeah, no doubt, no doubt. There was a gentleman, I didn't have a chance to write about him too much in the book, but he used to be a poet and kind of a bohemian in Ottawa and eventually started driving cab in the capitol. And would drive around politicians and supreme court justices and parliament hill reporters and journalists. And he knew everything. He knew when the elections were going to be called before the press did. And he was a fountain of information, and the few journalists who knew to talk to Bill, they could get some quality information from their driver.

Jodi: I'm sure that's true. So of all the drivers you interviewed, which driver has kind of stuck with you the most?

Marcello: So many have stuck with me for all different reasons. But I think the driver whose story is so like layered and interesting; it was Moe from Baghdad. And so Moe used to… He fought, he was this big dude and grew up in Baghdad, it could have a middle-class family. He fought two wars for Saddam Hussein, once first against the Iranians and then against the Americans in the first Gulf War.

He was an artist, so he had this artistic creative side to him too. He also, and I say this with affection, is he was an incredible bully without a filter. He has a tendency through some traumatic experiences during his time on the battlefield and in training. He has a tendency towards violence, and he's kind of this blowhard guy who now lives in Halifax who I absolutely adore, who there's so many there's so many layers to Moe and such an honesty about him, too, that I really find fascinating.

And for all the kind of like bombastic blowhard qualities of Moe, there's beneath it a real sensitivity and a real, I don't want to speak for him as a psychologist or anything like that, but there's a fragility and a damage to Moe that I find really fascinating. People who have read the book either they find Moe their favorite or least favorite driver. And I

think there's something about the layers to his personality and to his history that people find really fascinating and polarizing.

Jodi: And polarizing, because I think it's whether you connect with his inside or the outside bravado. I enjoyed Moe, I hope one day I can travel to Halifax and I hop in his cab one day.

I'm not sure we've had a just transition for taxi drivers in the way we talk about a just transition for energy workers, for example, as climate change and our response to it has negative impacts on that industry. And I was wondering if you had kind of thought about that, because you talk about some really important points in terms of the physical and the mental toll of the work and the violence. And what might a just transition have looked like for taxi drivers when kind of Uber swept into town and Lyft and all the app based companies?

Marcello: All the drivers wanted was an actual level playing field in fairness when those companies came into play. Now, there's lots of governments that are saying that, provincial and municipal government's, saying we're leveling that playing field and I think in a lot of places it's too little too late. But those people who kind of are supportive of the kind of Uber camp will say, well this is just competition and the drivers can't handle the competition.

And that's not the case, that's not what we're talking about at all. The drivers in in the cities where they work have for years followed the rules that their individual cities and authorities have imposed upon them as far as how many licenses are given out, for example, or how licensors are traded and how much training you need and how or much what kind of insurance you need, all these sorts of things. And then the app-based services come into play and don't have to follow any of those rules.

And so it's not about competition, it's about an unfair advantage. And that unfair advantage comes from the government, it comes from municipal, it comes from city hall. It comes from the province in Quebec, for example. And so if everyone- if Uber came in and were treated across the board like any other ride for hire company, then absolutely, then there would be less of a problem there.

And but the big problem too within a lot of cities is that your taxi license, they call it a medallion in New York, they call it permits in other places. But that was a marketable document that raised in value. It had a market value, that when drivers were issued that permit sometimes they paid thousands and thousands of dollars for it. But it would raise in value so at the end of your driving career you would sell it and that would be your retirement plan. In Toronto they were told that that's the words of here is your retirement plan.

And now that those permits in a lot of places are now rendered worthless, and that's not the fault of the drivers, that's not the fault of competition, that's a fault of regulation. That's simply not fair. I think that's what a lot of people don't realize is this is not about

the cab industry whining that they're being out outplayed by a new competitor, by the new company on the block. It's that it's an unfair competition. The rules are different.

Jodi: The rules are definitely different. And it is a regulated industry, as you say, so it's not like… You're not even bumping up against the invisible hand, you're bumping up against a very visible government hand, the man, the hand of the man.

Marcello: Yeah absolutely. It's funny though, you talk about Uber and as you can probably guess, every time I sat down with a cab driver, that was one of the first things they wanted to talk about. And that's what they assumed that I wanted to talk about too, that we're gonna have this long debate about Uber, which is fine. But in a way, that wasn't the focus of my interest, right, like I cared much less about driving cabs than I cared about the drivers.

And so I oftentimes I'd have to kind of sit back with my recorder and listen to a long and clearly well-rehearsed diatribe against the evils of Uber and city hall before I can get into the questions of like, okay, well what were you like as a kid? I mean like we had to get past that kind of that kind of talk before I can get into the meat of who they were.

Jodi: It was the elephant in the taxi.

Marcello: Yeah, absolutely.

Jodi: So I wanted to get you to tell the story about Ikwe, because not all taxi driving is done for profit.

Marcello: Right, yes. And Ikwe was unique because they're not cabs, well they're not taxi drivers, they're a response to it. So in Winnipeg, for many years women in Winnipeg, especially Indigenous women, were treated horribly often by Winnipeg's cab drivers. Everything from suggestive sexual comments to full out violence. And eventually they had enough, and there was a service was started. Kind of it was… I mean it still is, it was like this non-profit service that was based on Facebook called Ikwe and all it does, it was very simple. All it did was it paired women who had a car and some time to volunteer with women who needed a ride somewhere. So it's a ride service for free for women only in Winnipeg.

Now, if you're if you're a passenger on an Ikwe ride, you're expected to give a donation to the driver. And those donations are not… There's some suggested amounts and they're kind of akin to have a regular taxi fare. But what it's done for women of Winnipeg is to give them an option. And they've heard so many horror stories about driving in cabs that here they could feel safe in the back seat with a woman behind the wheel.

And what's so interesting about this service is the community that it created. You had hundreds and thousands of women sign up to be to be clients, and you and you had dozens of women sign up to be volunteers. And they created these little communities and friendships, and there was… The drivers would sit around at this one Tim Hortons in Winnipeg and talk all night while they're waiting for ride requests to pop up on the Facebook page.

It created this really a lovely connections between women in the community of Winnipeg, and it was kind of really heartwarming to see what they had created there.

Now of course, the cabbies in Winnipeg finds it less heart warming, and they certainly oppose this. They feel that they've been unfairly branded as racist and as violent. And to be fair, they've done themselves no favors in their response to it. A lot of the time they've responded to accusations of aggression with more aggression. And none of them wanted to talk to me. None of the cab industry and whatever wanted to talk to me once they heard I was talking to Ikwe.

But man, I'll tell you, I had so much joy by spending time with the women of Ikwe. Like they, again, wonderful stories of these women who had been- a lot of them had been through a lot and were there to help their community and to kind of build this connection between women in their city. It's really quite beautiful.

Jodi: Yeah, I was really quite struck by it. And I thought I bet Ikwe outlives the for-profit taxi industry, but then I read your postscript about how the pandemic has hurt the service. And I was so sad.

Marcello: Yes, not as sad as they were. Right? Because not only do they lose this sort of, well they started it, the founders of Ikwe started to help women. Right, it was to serve their fellow women of Winnipeg. And because of the pandemic, very fewer volunteers wanted to drive. There are few places to drive to. They stopped driving at night because they thought they were bringing people to parties and gatherings that were breaking the social gathering rules and they didn't want to be part of the problem.

But at the same time, if they stopped driving at night, then all those all those issues that women faced at night on the streets would… They didn't have an option to go with Ikwe so it really kind of tore up this this kind of beautiful little society that was created.

I just spoke to Christine of Ikwe yesterday, and things are getting a little bit better as we're nearing the end of the pandemic, one hopes, or at least we're seeing an end to it. She hopes that the volunteers will come back the drivers will come back and they'll kind of begin again, but she's worried that many of the volunteers that left Ikwe will have left for good.

Jodi: Yeah, it's a hard one to predict, right, because on the one hand probably the reason or the rationale for starting the service in the first place sadly probably still holds. But on the other hand, what made it sustainable and allowed it to thrive was community. And it's very hard to rebuild community bonds once they've been fractured.

Marcello: No, that's true. I can only hope, I mean because talking to the women of Ikwe, they got so much from that service from Ikwe itself. And not just the good feeling of doing something charitable for your community, but I talked to one woman named Sherry who talks about how she was painfully shy before starting to drive for Ikwe, and Ikwe gave her the confidence to speak to strangers. And she's a completely different person after her time with Ikwe.

I talked to another woman who spends all her time- she works with kids during the day and she spends all her time with children, and Ikwe offers this opportunity to just to socialize with other adults. It's something that she doesn't get in in her day-to-day life. It helps some women get in touch with their indigenous communities and their indigenous culture and background, so there's all these kind of layers of benefits that the women, both the drivers and the passengers, get from that service. And hopefully those benefits are so great that the women will flock back to the service once they can. It would be very sad if they didn't.

Jodi: Yes, well hopefully a lot of things come back once, social things, right, that have been discouraged as unsafe. Hopefully they come back.

When you reflect kind of on all the stories and the experience of interviewing all of these drivers, as you say, mostly men but some women too, what's the image of Canada that you walk away with? And did your own image of Canada as a country get iterated through this process?

Marcello: What another great question. But before I answer that, I want to say that I've never… This is my fifth book and I've never felt more of a conduit to stories than the writer of them. You know what I mean? Like these people's stories are so remarkable and I was, I think I was so grateful for them sharing them with me. And this is really- I was less the storyteller than the one who passes on those stories to the reader. And it was such a such a thrill.

As far as Canada, yes that's another great question. Sometimes for me I wonder if we as a society need to be more curious about those who are around us, to maybe lift our eyes up from those phones a little more and just acknowledge that the people we- the strangers around us have these incredible experiences, these incredible life histories. These people that we see just as a driver or just as our barista or just as the person bagging our groceries at a store, it's such a cliché. But they contain multitudes, right? I mean the layers of experience that we're surrounded by, the things that they know that we don't know. Everyone- people around us know things we don't know that we should know.

Canada has been good for… Obviously most of my drivers came from somewhere else, and most of my drivers would say that Canada has been good to them, and they're certainly happy to be here. It's a safe place, it's a place of opportunity. That opportunities that perhaps did not exist where they were born.

But also this is not… We can't get smug about that. I mean, all of these drivers face racism, they face violence, they face these challenges from Uber and these things that we talked about already. And so I think one of the things is that I'm less smug about our glorious nation than I was before I started this.

And it also made me look outside of our borders in a different way. And I knew nothing about the Sierra Leone civil war. I knew very little about what it meant to live in the Soviet Union during the cold war. These are all kinds of stories that I may have read a

paragraph or two about in my social studies book in junior high, but never ever sat next to someone who lived through these things. And I think as Canadians we just have to acknowledge the stories that surround us.

[Music swells]

Jodi: Marcello, thank you so much for sitting down with me and having this conversation. And thank you so much for taking the time to write such a beautiful book, sharing the lives that are so close to us that we may never have opened the book on without you.

Marcello: Oh, it's my pleasure to be here. Thank you so much.

[Music fades out]