

THE FUTURE, WHICH ALMOST WASN'T

He had to go a long way to get here, and really, he should have never made it. There's no *way* he should have made it, not if you look at things like destiny and fate and statistics, not to mention good logic and common sense, but here he is.

His name is Kenney Moore. (He spells it *-ey* because he likes to be different.) It's March 2014, and he is standing in a restaurant called Hwy 55 Burgers, Shakes & Fries that looks like something straight out of the 1950s. White tables with silver piping and silver chairs with teal and maroon seat cushions are scattered throughout the center of the restaurant, with vivid teal and maroon booths lining the walls. The floor is shiny black and white squares. Vinyl records and vintage-style murals cover the walls — men driving '57 Chevys, couples wearing classic '50s outfits eating in booths that look like the ones on the floor, and Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, and their peers performing. It's the newest Hwy 55, and while Moore can't make it to every store the first week it opens, he sure tries, and no way was he missing this one.

Moore just turned 51. He started the chain back in 1991,

when he was 28 years old and broke and desperate. After a year and a half, he was tens of thousands of dollars in debt and struggling. He hoped to, maybe one day, open 20 restaurants in eastern North Carolina, maybe do a few million a year in sales, make a nice little dent in the area, maybe even give some money away to people who could put it to good use, that sort of thing. That's aspirational enough for a kid who grew up broke, and who was a terrible student, and whose greatest ambition heading into college was to make it as a baseball player or maybe even as an actor. Twenty stores wouldn't be too shabby a legacy, and it would provide for his family, and he figured he couldn't handle much more than that, anyway.

Moore's been here all day, talking with his newest business partners, handsome young men in their twenties with manicured beards, and dark skin, and Lamborghinis. Moore's eyes are big and blue and alive, crackling with electricity, and he has a strong voice, one cultivated over years of practice. He has a goatee, mostly gray, and he has thick hair, almost shaggy but not quite, parted on the left and hanging over the sides of his forehead, over his ears, dirty blonde and gray. He wears dark blue jeans with brown loafers and a black v-neck t-shirt. His arms and chest are strong and thick, and his shoulders broad, like a man who works out, yeah, but who also just plain *works*.

The Hwy 55 he's standing in now could be anywhere in North Carolina, with a few minor exceptions. The telephone number on the glass door is a little strange, and there's Arabic on the menus, and a lot of the guys hanging out in here wear white *thobes*, tailored shirt-like tunics that reach to the ankles, and white *shoras*, scarves worn on the head and held in place by an *egal*, a black rope-like headband.

These are his newest business partners.

Moore steps outside to take a breath. He opens the glass doors and walks across the black marble threshold and down black marble steps. Rising before him are skyscrapers, many of them, all around. He's in Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates, where more than half a million people live, richest city in the world, miles upon miles upon miles away from home in every figurative and literal sense — 7,268 miles and a day in a plane around the planet from Mount Olive, North Carolina, population 5,000, the place he calls home, and even further from his past. This Hwy 55 is number 107 to open in the world, and just the first of dozens coming to the Middle East, and the next in a long, long line of what should one day be thousands more.

Moore flew out of Raleigh on his birthday, March 15, with his family and Guy Guthrie, the Hwy 55 Vice President of Franchise Sales. They spent a day in London with Moore's family, and then he and Guthrie hopped a flight to Abu Dhabi.

Once he arrived, he was astounded. Fifty years ago, Abu Dhabi's streets were lined with shanties. Earlier today he saw 11 new skyscrapers under construction on the same street. The city is full of breathtaking buildings — some that look like they are waving, some that look like perfect circles, some that look like pineapples. It's a city wild with human creativity and ambition, a place stretching all of its limits, a place growing and growing and growing — a good place for Moore and Hwy 55.

Moore looks up. It's a perfect and clear night. He can see all of the stars for millions of miles. He takes a deep breath, and then another. *I am halfway around the world.* He's in one of the most inspiring cities on the planet, in the middle of a booming epicenter of modern architecture — and right here, right behind him, in the middle of it all, is his restaurant, his

modest little slice of North Carolina. And not only that, but back home, there are Hwy 55s in a dozen states, and there are nearly a thousand more to come, all around the world. It's a safe bet that before long they'll hit sales of \$1 billion. The *Franchise Business Review* just ranked Hwy 55 as one of the best food franchises in the United States, and Hwy 55 also recently won a nationwide contest for the best burger.

This all hits Moore hard as he stands here on the Abu Dhabi sidewalk, humbling him, bringing tears to his eyes and nearly driving him to his knees as he thanks God.



The next day he flies to Paris — *Paris* — where his wife of 29 years, Karen, and three of his four kids are waiting for him: Emma, 21, a student at St. Andrews in Scotland; Isabelle, 13; and Dylan, 11. His fourth, Andy, the oldest at 24, is back in the States, where he graduated from Duke two years ago and now lives in New York City, an editor for a big website.

When Karen married Kenney way back when, the idea of *Kenney Moore* flying her to *Paris* was ridiculous. She didn't know she was marrying a guy who'd become the owner and CEO of a multinational company and be *flying her to Paris*. (For that matter, neither did he.) Karen grew up in a swanky private school where her father was the principal, and she came of age around trust fund babies who aspired to things like joining exclusive country clubs and, well, flying to Paris. She never wanted any part of that. She had no clue this is where she'd be at this point in her life, that her husband would be this type of guy.

Of course, Kenney is not *that* type of guy — he's a man who on any given day will wear T-shirts into the office that say "da fuq?" and "Libertarians: Quietly plotting to take over

the world and leave you alone” (a joke on good days, a little less so on bad). He drives too fast, and he still has a weakness for dip, and he still cusses more than he wants to. The cussing bothers him so much that one of his New Year’s resolutions was to stop. He broke it on January 2.



After a few days in Europe, Kenney is back in Mount Olive at 7:30 on Sunday evening. After a turbulent childhood spent all over the world as the stepson of a Marine, this is home. Mount Olive is about an hour west of Wilmington, 50 minutes south of Raleigh, and Kenney has lived here for the last 20 years. There are no skyscrapers. There isn’t even a bar. It’s small-town America at its finest: a small local college, a tiny downtown, the whole town taking up just over two square miles, surrounded by miles and miles of sprawling fields and farmland. His house is a two-story Colonial with wood siding painted olive green. A white fence surrounds the property and a gate blocks the driveway. That’s new, and Kenney would rather do without it, but people kept breaking in. They’re just a few blocks from Karen’s parents, and they’ve renovated and added onto the house, building up their home over many years. There’s a pool on the side and chickens in the yard — Karen likes fresh eggs — and four dogs running around, all different breeds and sizes.

Kenney’s in his chair in the living room by 7:45, and by 8, he’s asleep.

The next morning, he’s up around 8. He puts on sweatpants and a t-shirt and meditates for half an hour. Then he puts on a golf hat and running shoes, gets into his black Tesla Model S, and drives to the Hwy 55 Burgers, Shakes & Fries corporate office building, about five minutes from his house. (Cars are

all he really splurges on, and even then, while he buys expensive ones, he keeps just one at a time.) Kenney arrives at the office around nine and does his morning workout in the office gym — yoga today, working out the kinks from all the time in planes. After a shower, he changes into a v-neck t-shirt, jeans, and loafers, and he works until lunch, a few minutes before noon.

Lunch, as always, is in the conference room down the hall from his office, and, as always, the conference table is surrounded by about a dozen of Kenney's executive staff. They all eat lunch together almost every day. Today, they all buzz and gush about Kenney's Abu Dhabi trip. Most of them, anyway. The in-house attorney, Keith Moore — Kenney's younger half-brother — eats fast and silent at the end of the table, as he often does, and he's the first to leave, as he often is.

The room is lit by the sunlight pouring in through the window. Outside is a cool, clear spring day. There's also a parking lot with a maroon Trailblazer, an older, black Hummer H2, a black Camry, an old, white Jeep Cherokee, and a few other such modest cars, along with about a dozen bright teal Ford Fiestas wrapped with the Hwy 55 logo. Beyond the parking lot, three acres of fresh-cut grass stretch to the road, and beyond the road, and all around the office building, are acres upon acres of flat eastern North Carolina fields, stretching for miles interspersed with groves of green pine trees.

Kenney works until 7, and then he stays for a managers' meeting. Several dozen men and women of all ages fill the first floor meeting room. Kenney tells them about his trip, about the Abu Dhabi staff, about how hard they are working. He tells them about walking out of the restaurant and looking up at the night sky going on forever, and how he'd almost

cried, overwhelmed by gratitude. And then he tells them how he almost didn't make it there.

He almost didn't make it to Abu Dhabi, or Paris, or this office, as the head of one of the best franchises in America, for a multitude of reasons. Personal, professional, spiritual, existential — in many ways, he could have ended up going down a different and darker road.

Today, he tells his managers a simpler story. He's achieved remarkable things in his life, and he considers getting on a plane again as remarkable as anything else he's done. He is afraid of flying.

When Kenney started franchising outside of North Carolina a few years ago, he knew he should probably get over it at some point, but he still avoided it as long as he could. When he went to New York for a national television interview in October 2013, he took the train. That same month, Kenney's wife and two youngest kids, Isabelle and Dylan, flew to London to visit Emma, who flew down from Scotland. Kenney couldn't make himself go with them.

When he'd last flown — two decades prior — he nearly had a panic attack. He couldn't talk. He had cottonmouth. He couldn't eat his complimentary peanuts. He spent the whole flight squeezing his armrests so hard his hands cramped. He didn't mind the takeoff and landing, even though those were technically the most dangerous parts. It was flight itself that terrified him. Flight is, after all, a war against gravity, and a war that, when you're sitting in a seat in a metal tube in the sky, you can't help fight. It was a real fear borne out of his complete lack of control, and in many ways, Kenney Moore's entire life has been a fight for control.

But with his family an ocean away, "I was absolutely beating myself up for it," Kenney says. "One, for not going.

For letting that fear get to me. And then, here I had my wife and my kids in another country, in a big city, and I'm not even there with them. You know, to protect them as a husband and a dad, and to share that experience with them."

So it wasn't Abu Dhabi and becoming an international restaurant mogul that made Kenney overcome his fear of flying — the sweeter, almost saccharine truth is that it was for his family.

Karen gave Kenney a book called *Soar: The Breakthrough Treatment for Fear of Flying*, by Tom Bunn, a pilot of 31 years and licensed psychologist.

Kenney devoured it.

Every November, he and several of his old baseball buddies make a trip down to Kenney's house in Orlando, and they always take an RV. That November, though, after Karen and the kids' great London adventure, Kenney determined to fly down to Florida, beat this fear. He told few people — he didn't even tell Karen. "I didn't want her to talk to me the whole week leading up, and saying, 'How are you doing?'" all the time, and all that," he says. "I was so bad that even if we talked about flying, I would get anxious. Just *discussing* flying."

His friend Billy Godwin, an old college baseball teammate who was going to drive the RV to Orlando, offered to go with him, but Kenney said, "No, this is something I have to do by myself."

He wore jeans and a T-shirt and a blazer. He checked his bags and his golf clubs and made his way through the security line, making sure to take his laptop out of his carry-on. He took off his blazer and his belt and his watch and dropped his wallet in the bin, and he headed for the metal detector. The only anxiety he felt was when a TSA agent yelled at him because he forgot to take off his shoes.

While waiting to board, he didn't take a tranquilizer or a Xanax. He didn't even drink. He wanted to *feel* the bumps, feel everything that scared him.

He had a window seat. When they took off, he didn't squeeze the armrests or get cottonmouth. He looked out the window, watching as they left the ground, and he smiled. *Whoa. I'm doing it.* When they descended toward the Orlando runway, and the plane passed over the ocean and then some lakes and ponds, he didn't worry about crashing into them. He admired the beauty, and he thought about how nice it was to fly to Orlando in two hours instead driving for nine, and he looked for alligators.

To make up for missing October, Kenney made the Abu Dhabi trip into a whole big thing, with the weeklong stay in London and Paris for his wife and kids, so they could all hang out, so they could do what they should've done the year before, together. And then that night in Abu Dhabi, looking up at the stars, he felt that moment with God. Worth it, a million times over.

After telling his managers that story, Kenney said, "Look, I practice what I preach: You decide who and what you're going to be every day. I'm so glad that I overcame my fear of flying so that I got to experience that. I made a decision that this fear was all in my head. That fear was based on nothing real. It was all me. And I overcame it. So I'm practicing what I tell you all to do: Do not worry about your past. Do not worry about where you come from. It's not who you are that matters, it's who you aspire to become, and how hard you are willing to work to get there. You wake up every day, and you decide who and what you're going to be."

Good and inspirational words, a good talk from a good CEO. Leaders everywhere and throughout history have given

speeches like it, and probably several times over. But Kenney feels like people are forgetting it — and not just everyday people like himself whose mission (or plight) it is to find a way in this world. He feels like even the world's leaders seem to be losing hope. Soon after his Abu Dhabi trip, Kenney tells a writer, “I remember seeing a presidential campaign commercial in 1984 that said, *It's morning again in America,*’ and being inspired by it. I believed that I could do or be whatever I wanted. And I just don’t hear that anymore. I don’t hear our leaders talking about, *‘Go get the American Dream.’* That’s the sad part. Most of what comes out of Washington, D.C. — and from either party — is incredibly negative. The rhetoric you often hear from politicians and you get from the media now, it’s almost like that American Dream is dead. And it’s not. And if anyone can call B.S. on that, I can.”



Kenney has become what he’s become and built the company he’s built and helped the people he’s helped not only because he’s learned how to be a great businessman and a great leader, but also because he’s had to learn how to be a decent man. And that was much harder — *still is* much harder — than being a great businessman, and that’s as much if not more a part of his story than any of the ways he built his business. Kenney hasn’t just wanted to build a great business and do great things for the world and live the American Dream. His whole life has been an exercise in getting control, not only of his business but also of himself.

One thing Kenney loved about flying to and from Abu Dhabi: the in-flight entertainment, a movie buffet. He watched *12 Years A Slave*, *Jobs*, *Nebraska* — and one in particular that his travel buddy, Guy Guthrie, remembers with

horror: *August: Osage County*.

It's about a dysfunctional, vicious Southern family. One scene goes on for more than 10 minutes with everyone yelling and swearing and saying the worst things to each other, all while sharing a meal. Guthrie was recoiling and squirming in his seat, not believing people could speak to each other like that. Kenney, however, was all too comfortable. Watching the scene didn't feel *good*, but it was familiar, the way an ex-con might feel visiting a prison.

Kenney grew up in one such metaphorical prison, its bars and locks and guards all so much yelling and swearing and chaos. He also thought he'd long ago broken free, only to discover, not so long ago, that he was wrong. Over the past few years, he's found himself fighting to break free all over again in order to save all he's built from being laid to waste.