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# REVEALING STORIES THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY – THE ART OF VISUAL STORYTELLING

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Quick Guide  
Written by Karthika Gupta







Photograph by Karthika Gupta - Memorable Jaunts

One of my recurring dreams is that I wake up one morning to several hundred texts, emails, and voicemails from all over the world congratulating me for the fact that one of my photographs was published in National Geographic! Hey, a girl can dream big, right! (And on another note, if you know someone in National Geographic, please send me their way.)

Once I wake up and come back to my reality, I always give myself a quick pep-talk. If I want something that bad, I really need to work hard for it. And by working hard, I mean perfecting my craft – the art of photography – to the point where all my photographs tell a story; the right story.






Photograph by Karthika Gupta -  
Memorable Jaunts

*A busy fishing village scene in Southern India – all that color and activity was a sensory overload. I took a few deep breaths just to calm my creative brain to really see what was going on before I shot a single frame.*

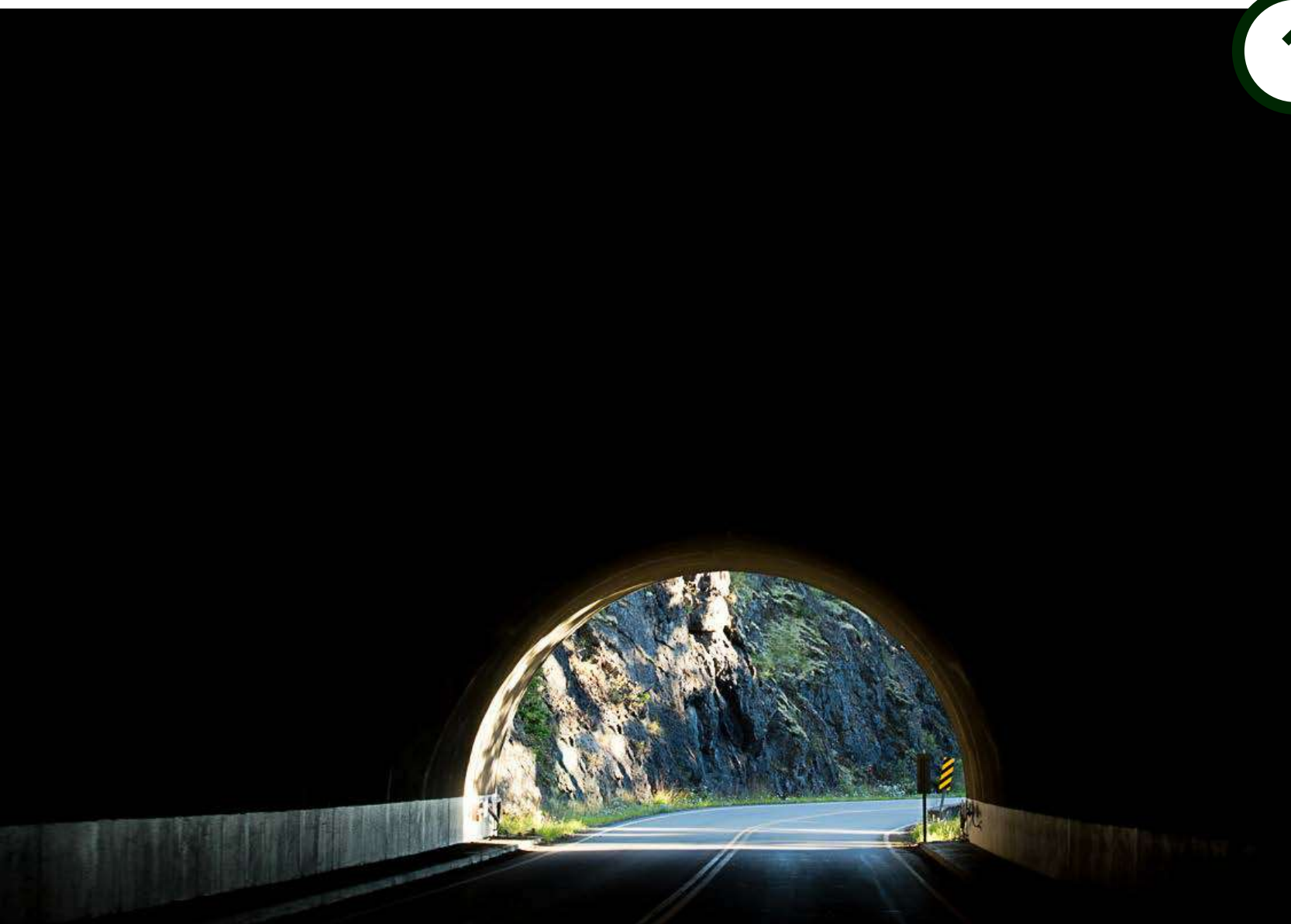
Storytelling is, by no means, a new concept. It has been an integral part of human existence since time immemorial. Either in verbal form, written word, pictorial, or photos, we have all been exposed to storytelling at some point in our lives. In photography, visual storytelling is often associated with the documentary style of photography – letting life unfold naturally and capturing moments around that. Documentary-style photographers pride themselves on their ability to tell the story exactly how they imagine it when they see a scene unfold in front of them, but effective storytelling can also be done in situations that are more structured and posed with a little pre-planning and research.

On any given day, there are a multitude of visual stimuli that our eyes and brain receive. Some are simple mundane stuff – our everyday – and others are colors, feelings, emotions, people, places, or things that somehow strike a chord in our brain. As visual artists, we find that we are driven by a strong urge to capture those feelings in an image. Have you ever seen a stunning sunset and run outside to capture it with either your phone or DSLR camera because it was so stunning that you had to capture it to enjoy at a later stage? Surely if something moves us this strongly, it must be something of importance that we need to share with the world. Visual storytelling, if done correctly, is such a strong and compelling medium with which we can convey thoughts, feelings, and emotions. However, to be an effective storyteller, there are a few key things to keep in mind that go beyond the obvious.

At the end of this guide, I hope you have a few new tips and tricks to practice effective storytelling via your photos.

 **Recommended Reading:** Want to improve your storytelling skills? Grab a copy of this best-selling premium guide, [Powerful Imagery](#), by award-winning photographer Mitchell Kanashkevich.






Photograph by Karthika Gupta - Memorable Jaunts

*I drove back and forth from this bridge a few different times during my road trip to Olympic National Park and envisioned this image even before I actually took the shot. It's my take on the proverbial 'light at the end of the tunnel' representation.*

## 1 PLANNING AND EXECUTING


Just like everything else in life, a little planning goes a long way. Even before you click the shutter to take a photograph, make sure you have a plan on what you are going to photograph, how you are going to photograph it, and what you are going to do with your photos at the end of the day. The more thought you put into your photos, the more effective your photo excursions will be. Now, I am not negating spontaneity; that is equally important. But being spontaneous does not mean you don't plan your photoshoots and assignments. My planning includes things like researching best times to photograph a location, weather predictions, general clothing guidelines (if I am photographing clients), a detailed shot list for my wedding and family sessions, photo must-haves for when I travel, as well as a list of off-the-beaten track locations.

 **Key Lesson:** Have a detailed plan for all your shoots and sometimes take it a step further and have an alternative plan B in case things don't go your way.

## 2 STORYBOARDING – SINGLE VERSES MULTIPLE IMAGES

Visual storytelling can be in the form of a single image or a series of images. It does not matter what you choose if you have a plan on how you are going to execute it. When you choose to have a series of images tell a story, make sure your story has a defined beginning, a middle, and an end. That way you can visually walk the viewer through the series of images to effectively tell the story. Think of each image as a single chapter in a good book and how each chapter will lead the audience all the way through to the end. Another thing to keep in mind is to identify a hero image. To me, a hero image is that one image that 'makes' the story. And believe me, as you practice storyboarding, identifying the hero image will become second nature. If you are choosing to just use one image to tell your story, focus on one key element of the story. It is quite rare that you will be able to emphasize more than one key idea in a single image. You run the risk of competing subjects and confusing the viewer on what to focus on while looking at your image.

For me, storyboarding is one of the most exciting elements of any photoshoot. This is my chance to inject my personality and creativity into a shoot. To that end, once I get to a location, I do a general walkthrough of the area before taking any pictures. This is my time to formulate a story in my head. I find that when I have a story outline (a beginning, a middle, and an end), I work more efficiently and effectively. I have done this long enough to know that when I skip this step, I end up photographing in a very haphazard manner and have images that I am not proud of at all. Personally, I will risk losing the 'shot' and instead focus on the story.

 **Key Lesson:** Learn to identify hero images (a.k.a. images that either make or break a story).






Photograph by Karthika Gupta - Memorable Jaunts

*As a wedding photographer, I love first looks between a couple. It is the perfect time to use a storyboard concept to capture that special moment, especially when the groom is as expressive as this one!*



### 3 TECHNICAL COMPETENCE

So many of us think we can only be either a creative artist or a technical geek, but to be a successful photographer as well as a successful photography business owner, we need to be a little bit of both. Really take the time to understand the basics of photography like light, composition, colors, tone, and how these impact your style. Once you have mastered all the basics, add additional layers to make your images emotional and engaging. Emotions don't always need to be related to human subjects. They can be anything ranging from a landscape image to still life. To make your images engaging, try to look for elements that will grab your viewer's attention and hold it for more than a few seconds.

 **Key Lesson:** Pay close attention to the basics of photography. It is no good having a beautiful, thought-provoking image that is technically flawed.



Photograph by Karthika Gupta - Memorable Jaunts

*The light, the furniture, the space, and the florals all spoke the same language. The scene was so perfectly laid out for me that all I had to do was simply channel that light and click the shutter. It's the perfect summer patio for hanging out with friends.*



## 4

## RECOGNIZE THE VISUAL CUES

One easy way to train your eye to recognize engaging photographs is to scroll through visual platforms like Pinterest, Instagram, or even old fashioned print publications like magazines and books to take note of what images speak to you. Side note: My favorite visual platform is cookbooks even though I am a terrible cook. For me, they are so inspiring in terms of the colors, composition, and their ability to induce an instant food craving the moment you open the book!



Photograph by Karthika Gupta - Memorable Jaunts

*The iconic Taj Hotel in Mumbai, India. The birds, the morning light, and the calmness around is exactly how I remember it from my childhood days. Two hours later, there was hardly any place to stand without being run over by the crowds and all the birds were gone.*






Photograph by Karthika Gupta - Memorable Jaunts

Pick a handful of images and then dissect each photo to understand why they caught your attention. Was it composition? Was it lighting? Was it posing? Was it a photo that was shot completely in the spur of the moment? Take notes and try to see if you find a certain pattern in what attracts you to certain images. This exercise will not only help you learn to recognize visual cues that really resonate with you, but also help you understand your preference for a certain style of imagery. For me, images that are bright and airy grab my attention more than dark and moody portraits. I also love landscape images that have some sort of a path as an element in the frame. I really gravitate towards these because for me, they bring about a sense of movement, unknown adventures, and a sense of wanderlust.

This image was taken from a moving car. The moment I saw her walking along the road, I knew I had to photograph her. She has a sense of urgency in her step and I had so many questions running through my head: where is she coming from? Are the containers full or empty? What is her house like? Where does she live and what is she going to do next?

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## 5 INJECT YOUR PERSONALITY

If you are just starting out in photography, it is very tempting to copy the work of others who have been there and done similar things. I challenge you to not give in to that temptation. Not only are you suppressing your own creativity (and believe me, we all have it within us), but you are also losing out on all the learnings that are to be had when you set on the path to learning how to do something. The way you see things is unique because there is only one of you. Once you learn how to train yourself to see things around you with the objective of telling a story, you will not want to copy the work of anyone else because it will seem fake and lack authenticity.

 **Key Lesson:** Photograph that which makes your creative soul happy...everything else is just distracting noise.

Photograph by Karthika Gupta -  
Memorable Jaunts

*The quintessential shot of  
a wedding dress – nothing  
new and been done so  
many times by so many  
photographers.*



Photograph by Karthika Gupta -  
Memorable Jaunts

*This, on the other hand, is  
a different perspective on  
bridal details.*







Photograph by Karthika Gupta - Memorable Jaunts

## 6 EMBRACE YOUR MISTAKES

We all make mistakes. Believe me, there isn't a single photographer out there who has not made mistakes in their photography career. Be it bad lighting, bad direction, missing the moment and other such nuances, we have all been there and done that. The key is not to never make mistakes but to learn from each situation and/or mistake and do it better the next time around. So, give yourself permission to just play and take pictures for learning and educating your creative soul. Take those learnings to create better photographs – images that provide aesthetic engagement and meaning to your audience.

 **Key Lesson:** Give yourself permission to make mistakes and experiment in your photography. Making mistakes and learning from them is the best way to make yourself a better visual storyteller. Make mistakes, learn, and do better the next time!





Photograph by Karthika Gupta - Memorable Jaunts

I had three seconds to take the shot on the previous page and how I wish I had just put the camera down and enjoyed the scene. So many things are wrong here: the man, his expression, the angle. Perhaps if I had waited for a few seconds more, he would have lost his fascination with my camera and looked away, making the shot more pleasing.

Max looked so adorable reading his book sitting all alone on that big sofa. Had I paid more attention, I would have cleaned out a few distractions in the frame, making it more appealing.





Photograph by Karthika Gupta - Memorable Jaunts

I was able to clean out some of the distracting elements in post-production and save this image (although, I am still bothered by the shoes and the stack of blocks that are distracting in my mind).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karthika Gupta is a wedding, lifestyle, portrait, and editorial photographer based in Chicago. Her style of photography is fun, fresh, and organic. She strives to capture authentic emotions and interactions among her clients and emotive imagery in her commercial work.

She loves connecting with other creatives and photographers and is always ready for an engaging conversation about photography and the art of storytelling.

She can be found online at [www.karthikagupta.com](http://www.karthikagupta.com) and on social media at:

Instagram: [www.instagram.com/karthikagupta](http://www.instagram.com/karthikagupta)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/memorablejaunts](http://www.facebook.com/memorablejaunts)

Twitter: [www.twitter.com/karthikagupta](http://www.twitter.com/karthikagupta)

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