

In this story, the author describes the remarkable recovery of a dying hummingbird that is found by his gentle neighbor one winter day in California. Read the story and answer the questions that follow.

The Hummingbird That Lived Through Winter

by William Saroyan

1 There was a hummingbird once which in the wintertime did not leave our neighborhood in Fresno, California.

2 I'll tell you about it.

3 Across the street lived old Dikran, who was almost blind. He was past eighty and his wife was only a few years younger. They had a little house that was as neat inside as it was ordinary outside—except for old Dikran's garden, which was the best thing of its kind in the world. Plants, bushes, trees—all strong, in sweet black moist earth—whose guardian was old Dikran. All things from the sky loved this spot in our poor neighborhood, and old Dikran loved *them*.

4 One freezing Sunday, in the dead of winter, as I came home from Sunday School I saw old Dikran standing in the middle of the street trying to distinguish what was in his hand. Instead of going into our house to the fire, as I had wanted to do, I stood on the steps of the front porch and watched the old man. He would turn around and look upward at his trees and then back to the palm of his hand. He stood in the street at least two minutes and then at last he came to me. He held his hand out, and in Armenian* he said, "What is this in my hand?"

5 I looked.

6 "It is a hummingbird," I said half in English and half in Armenian. Hummingbird I said in English because I didn't know its name in Armenian.

7 "What is that?" old Dikran asked.

8 "The little bird," I said. "You know. The one that comes in the summer and stands in the air and then shoots away. The one with the wings that beat so fast you can't see them. It's in your hand. It's dying."

9 "Come with me," the old man said. "I can't see, and the old lady's at church. I can feel its heart beating. Is it in a bad way? Look again, once."

10 I looked again. It was a sad thing to behold. This wonderful little creature of summertime in the big rough hand of the old peasant. Here it was in the cold of winter, absolutely helpless and pathetic, not suspended in a shaft of summer light, not the most alive thing in the world, but the most helpless and heartbreaking.

11 "It's dying," I said.

12 The old man lifted his hand to his mouth and blew warm breath on the little thing in his hand which he could not even see. "Stay now," he said in Armenian. "It is not long till summer. Stay, swift and lovely."

* *Armenian* — language spoken by the people of Armenia

13 We went into the kitchen of his little house, and while he blew warm breath on the bird he told me what to do.

14 “Put a tablespoonful of honey over the gas fire and pour it into my hand, but be sure it is not too hot.”

15 This was done.

16 After a moment the hummingbird began to show signs of fresh life. The warmth of the room, the vapor of the warm honey—and, well, the will and love of the old man. Soon the old man could feel the change in his hand, and after a moment or two the hummingbird began to take little dabs of the honey.

17 “It will live,” the old man announced. “Stay and watch.”

18 The transformation was incredible. The old man kept his hand generously open, and I expected the helpless bird to shoot upward out of his hand, suspend itself in space, and scare the life out of me—which is exactly what happened. The new life of the little bird was magnificent. It spun about in the little kitchen, going to the window, coming back to the heat, suspending, circling as if it were summertime and it had never felt better in its whole life.

19 The old man sat on the plain chair, blind but attentive. He listened carefully and tried to see, but of course he couldn’t. He kept asking about the bird, how it seemed to be, whether it showed signs of weakening again, what its spirit was, and whether or not it appeared to be restless; and I kept describing the bird to him.

20 When the bird was restless and wanted to go, the old man said, “Open the window and let it go.”

21 “Will it live?” I asked.

22 “It is alive now and wants to go,” he said. “Open the window.”

23 I opened the window, the hummingbird stirred about here and there, feeling the cold from the outside, suspended itself in the area of the open window, stirring this way and that, and then it was gone.

24 “Close the window,” the old man said.

25 We talked a minute or two and then I went home.

26 The old man claimed the hummingbird lived through that winter, but I never knew for sure. I saw hummingbirds again when summer came, but I couldn’t tell one from the other.

27 One day in the summer I asked the old man.

28 “Did it live?”

29 “The little bird?” he said.

30 “Yes,” I said. “That we gave the honey to. You remember. The little bird that was dying in the winter. Did it live?”

31 “Look about you,” the old man said. “Do you see the bird?”

32 “I see *hummingbirds*,” I said.

33 “Each of them is our bird,” the old man said. “Each of them, each of them,” he said swiftly and gently.