



## BOWLED OVER

The little sea creature who swam into our hearts

My family's pet, Friddles, doesn't cuddle up with us on a cold winter day, he's never played the piano on YouTube, and the only trick he knows is how to hide in his plastic rock. In fact, Friddles—an iridescent purple betta fish we bought for a couple of dollars—doesn't really do much more than swim around his tank and look up at us with his tiny black eyes. But this itty-bitty thing has won over my family's collective heart and taught my daughters a few surprising lessons about perseverance, love and defying expectations.

Friddles came to us as

a last-chance pet. My daughters, Bellamy, 11, and Molly, 9, would have preferred a fluffier animal, but the no-dogs rule in our apartment building and my allergies put the kibosh on that. My husband, Jeremy, a bit of a neat freak, was opposed to any creature that would require a litter box or smelly food pellets (or—shudder—live crickets). When the girls won a couple of goldfish at a carnival, we thought we'd finally found the perfect low-maintenance pets—until both fish died the next day. Then a friend suggested, "Why don't you

try a betta? They're hardier than goldfish."

To be honest, I expected Friddles to live a few months at most, and I expected my daughters' interest in him to quickly wane. After all, they had plenty of other things vying for their attention—the latest developments on *Glee*, the newest Wii games and, of course, all the inherent social drama of being grade-school girls. But here we are, almost three years later, still madly in love with our little fish. We are constantly amazed at Friddles' longevity and will to survive. There have been a couple of close calls: Part of his tail seemed to disappear overnight, and he spent almost a week last year listlessly floating on his side. But each time he rallied back to health, as my husband and daughters and I cheered him on from the sidelines. Friddles taught us there is always hope, even when things look bleak, and medical miracles, even on the tiniest scale, do happen.

As far as affection goes, you wouldn't think that a creature the size of a cashew could muster up much emotion, but Friddles is a giant when it comes to showing my daughters how much he cares. As soon as one of the girls walks near his tank, Friddles will pop out from wherever he's resting—that plastic rock and the warm spot behind the filter are favorite hangouts—and swim up to the top, making happy circles in the tank. Of course he associates my daughters' faces with his

daily helping of fish flakes, but even my occasionally eye-rolling 11-year-old can appreciate his displays of unconditional love. Sometimes when she comes home from school in a bad mood—perhaps after an argument with a friend—she drops her backpack and beelines to her room to visit Friddles. She knows by the swish of his tail that he is always excited to see her, a true and loyal friend.

Remember my husband, Jeremy, who didn't want any pet at all, and only gave in after I promised to take charge of the tank cleanings

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and feedings? Guess who checks with the girls every morning to make sure they've fed Friddles before school? Jeremy. And who did I find in the bathroom the other day with yellow rubber gloves on, scrubbing Friddles' favorite rock with an old toothbrush? Jeremy. When I reminded him of his early opposition to fish ownership, he simply smiled and said, "Well, I feel like he's become part of our family." In those little ways that creatures sneak into your life, Friddles has—and we can't imagine our lives without him. ●

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