

Cecilia Sawyer

Fiction

The Loved One Replica Company

Kelsey P. - six-month review

Product: Loved One Replica Droid

Rating: 

Would you recommend this product: Maybe.

Today I took the Replica Droid of my mother to the beach. This is our fifth outing, and I think she's doing well with them. We sat on the sand and ate ham and mustard sandwiches that I brought from home. I covered the charging port on her hip with packing tape to keep water and sand from getting in it and messing up her electrical system, which seemed to work. She laid out the same blue quilt we've been taking to the beach since I was 7. She told me stories, and I ignored when she got the details wrong.

She handled it all very well. I had seen some people online saying that their droids freaked out at the beach, but she didn't do anything like that, so I guess that was just some kind of bug that has since been fixed. She wanted to put her feet in the water, but I wasn't sure that the silicone would actually protect her circuitry.

Droid Mom and I have already been to the movies, the mall, the zoo, and the art museum, all with minimal difficulties. She did get a piece of popcorn lodged in her throat tube at the movie, but I was able to get it out with a pair of tweezers. When I told her that my Dad's Mom, Grandma Margie, died last year, she shed one ounce of 'tears' from her reservoir of purified

water. When I told her that Josh and I got engaged in March she said, “Who the hell gets engaged in March?” It was spoken in her voice, but her inflection was off, and the words fell flat.

Josh didn’t think getting the clone was a good idea. He was scared that her charging dock would take up too much space in the living room. “It’s not like a lamp that just uses a cord, it’s a six-foot-tall box and we can’t even put it in the corner,” he complained, citing our middle-of-the-wall outlets. (Although, after seeing it in our apartment, even he admitted that it’s much less obtrusive than one would expect.) He said her digestion fluid was too expensive and she wouldn’t be honest with me. He gave in when I reminded him that my *real* mother wasn’t honest with me either. Still, he didn’t think she would let me grieve “naturally.”

When she arrived, I couldn’t believe how much she looked like Mom. She had all the same wrinkles and freckles, and her teeth were *perfect*; they looked just like hers. I really couldn’t believe it. The first three days we had her all I could do was look at her, musing about her hands and the rosiness of her cheeks. The idea that this wasn’t actually her, that this was just a robotic replication, took a long time to sink in. We would play board games and bake together, and it was like I had my mom back. I didn’t have to explain myself to her; she knew me.

But as more and more time passed, the physical flaws stuck out the way nails poke through a dilapidated railing. Her hair slightly the wrong shade of blonde, leaning mousier than hers was. The freckle under her left eye was too far to the left rather than centered under her pupil. I could see the mechanization behind her eyes. Josh told me I was nitpicking, that there’s no way they could create a truly perfect replica of a real person. Since she cost so much money, I should be happy that they got as close as they did. “Look at the teeth!” he reminded me and I saw the way that her left canine sat the tiniest bit back from the rest of her teeth. But her processed silicone skin would never move the same way; it would never bruise or bleed.

By month three, I would wake up in the middle of night and watch her sit in her charging dock, standing up with her head down and arms limp. I would sing her lullabies so softly that I wasn't sure if the words were actually leaving my lips. Songs I hadn't heard since I was a little girl leaked out of me like sweat in the summer. Maybe in my midnight delirium I thought these songs would bring her back to me, like they were the key to luring my mother out of this robot, making her real again. Hours later Josh would find me sitting tucked into the corner of the couch facing her. He would take me back to bed, bring me a cup of water, and tell me I was allowed to miss her. That I was allowed to feel like this droid didn't compare to her.

Our first trip out, the one to the movies, happened on Thanksgiving, three months and three weeks in. Josh had to go to New Jersey for a bachelor party a few days before. He stayed and did Thanksgiving with his family to avoid the airport in the middle of that holiday travel. So, it was just Droid Mom and me. We went to the movies because the Loved Ones Forever website said it was a good outing since the droids can talk about the movies. The website said it's one of the activities that can help build the bond between person and droid, as well as increase their conversational skills. They were right; she did great. The robots can remember what they watched with more accuracy than they can recall from their memory bank since it's something they themselves have seen rather than remembering what is essentially a story they have been told. Droid Mom was able to talk more cohesively about the movie than any of Mom's memories we had compiled. A hodgepodge version of a life brought together from the survey, questionnaire, pictures, videos, and additional written anecdotes I sent to the Loved Ones Forever company. Droid Mom said she liked the movie (some rom com about a woman who owned a bakery and a secret agent acting as her employee) but didn't know why. Everything went as expected, minus the aforementioned popcorn incident.

The next week was our mall trip. I needed to buy some winter clothes to wear to the office, so I took Mom Clone with me. I thought she'd be able to practice giving her opinion more freely. And she did. Her opinion was just bad. She said that her favorite thing I tried on was a pink and yellow strapless maxi dress, which was not only seasonally inappropriate, but quite literally squeezing my chest so tightly that I couldn't breathe. Not something my mom ever would have liked. She would have rolled her eyes and said that the yellow made me look sick. She would have said that strapless 'doesn't work' for my shoulders and run to find me a blazer. My mother was always trying to get me to wear blazers, "Your shoulders are so strong! You need to lean into that," and she would say it like a compliment, but it never really felt like one. Droid Mom and I ate pretzel bites and got Christmas Cookie lattes, both of which she was able to eat and break down in the digestion fluid with no problem. I really do love that they can eat food, it does wonders to make them feel more real. When you can eat with them, it's hard to see them as a robot.

The zoo was the most difficult outing. It was hard for her to understand that we keep the animals in cages. She quite couldn't find the difference between a movie screen and the glass walls of the enclosures. "They're real?" she asked me as we sat on a bench watching the Gorillas. When I told her they were, she asked why they were here and not out in the wild. I tried to explain to her that most of these animals couldn't live in the wild, then I realized that I didn't actually know if that was true, so I just shut my mouth and agreed with her. All her questions made me wonder if these questions were where things my mom always carried in the back of her mind, or (more likely) they were coming from a lack of detail in my memory submissions. When we got home, I went to the Loved Ones Forever website and learned that you can actually update their memory files anytime, even after they arrive. So, I spent hour adding to her files, explaining

things in as much detail as I possibly could to try to fill in the gaps between the knowledge the droids have (basic language, math, reading, emotion, and pattern recognition) and other information she would need to make sense of her memories. I explained zoos and shopping malls and pets and anything else I could think of. But she could handle all the walking and the chill of early December. Bear in mind, I do live in California, so I can't attest to how the droids handle extreme cold.

She liked the art museum. She liked how quiet it was. She said her favorite part was the Impressionist room. That had been my mom's favorite too. When she talked about the paintings, I heard Mom's voice, but it was flat and, well, robotic. It was so close to right, so close to real. When she walked, I could hear the silicone of her feet sticking to the backs of her heels. She looked at every painting for one minute exactly. She just stood at a distance, looking at the art straight on. She never got in close and looked at the brush strokes, and she never read a single plaque. It was almost like if there was too much new information for her to process, she would short-circuit.

It was Josh's idea to have my dad, who was also not particularly keen on the droid, over. "If there's a version of his wife out there, even a fake one like this, he deserves to meet her. That's what I would want if you were gone," he told me. He thought since we had spent so much money on the droid, we needed to go all the way. He said she would have to integrate into our lives, not just sit in our house and sometimes go to the zoo. And Droid Mom had been doing well on our outings, so I agreed. Dad could meet Droid Mom and make up his own mind about her.

The big thing the droid is missing seems to be spirit. If your loved one had no soul, you might not notice a difference. But mom had spirit. She had soul. So much that it leaked out wherever she went. She left bits of herself in everything she touched, every meal she made, and

every person she talked to. She had oil paintings of cereal bowls in the kitchen and knit everyone mittens for Christmas two years before she passed. And she wasn't perfect by any means, but all the backhanded blazers she gave me were just coffee grounds that slipped past the filter. She had more good in her than most people, more coffee than grounds.

The droids are more like dry erase boards than people; you can wipe them clean and start all over. I wasn't sure that I could stand to see the way I knew my dad would crumple when he saw how vacant she was. She was mom, just flattened, steam rolled. You could erase her microchip and she would be gone.

But we invited dad to dinner and he said yes. Frankly, I wasn't expecting him to. Every other time we had talked about Droid Mom he had said things like *'That thing isn't your mother and I will not treat it as such.'* I had never asked him to pretend it was mom. When I look back, I can see that even I was starting to realize that it could never be. But at that point I thought there was still a chance that I could get him to come around, that I could get him to see that even if she wasn't mom, she was *so close*. At that point I had poured hours and hours into making her as real as I possibly could. I thought that if I could get my dad on board, he could fill in the gaps I knew I left.

I spent days worrying about the dinner. Not because I was worried it wouldn't go well. More because I was worried it would hurt my dad to see this almost-mom. We had watched mom die, watched her get weak and lose herself in her own mind. Droid Mom was more like mom when she was sick than when she was healthy. I didn't want my dad to think *that's* how I remembered her. I hoped he would see this as a technological problem, not my failure to create a good reproduction. I knew how Droid Mom was; I just hoped he wouldn't think it was my fault that she was like that.

The dinner went as good as it could have gone. When dad arrived, he shook Droid Mom's silicone hand. I could see tears misting in his eyes, but he never let any fall. He tried so hard to find the woman he had married in this robot. He ate dinner and made conversation and laughed at Josh's stories about work. He mentioned things that he knew always made mom laugh and he didn't shut down when I was the only one who did. After a while he shrank in on himself. He pushed peas around his plate like a little kid and was gone for well over five minutes when he excused himself to the bathroom. When he came back, his eyes were rimmed with red. It was a couple of days after Josh's 32nd birthday, so I had gotten a cake to celebrate after dinner. Dad left before we lit the candles, claiming he had gotten a sudden headache and wanted to get home and go to bed so he could sleep it off. And I couldn't be mad at him even as he lied right to my face.

Droid Mom did fine with dinner. She ate the food and told dad he hoped his headache went away as we were saying our goodbyes. She laughed at most of the appropriate times, with the exception of the jokes dad made specially for her. When I walked him out to his car, I hugged him and told him that I was still working on getting her humor right, which wasn't a lie but also wasn't the truth. I was always sending in more memories and adding details and context to the ones in her system already, but I can't add memories I don't have. I told my dad that I could add him as a Memory Contributor so that he could add his memories of mom, but he told me that he didn't need to. He knew that mom would have smacked his hand and said, *'Dave why would you say that!'* to most of his jokes anyways. I didn't have to remind him that she would have been laughing as she said it. When I went back inside, I couldn't look at Droid Mom.

I stopped our weekly outings. I couldn't stand to watch her interact with the world *wrong*. The ways she had interacted with dad. When she spoke, you couldn't see the life in her eyes or

hear the joy in her voice, I suppose because it wasn't there. She wasn't there. So, for about two months she stayed home when Josh and I went to work. She watched movies and sat in her charging dock. Josh and I would go on date nights and to parties thrown by friends. For two months I left early in the morning and came home late at night. It kind of made me feel like a teenager again, coming home in the middle of the night to see Mom Clone sitting on the couch watching Rom Coms in the dark. Mom Clone would tuck herself into the left corner of the couch the same way my real mom always did. That wasn't a detail I put in the memory form.

Four months ago, I would have said that everyone should get a loved one replica droid. They are technical marvels, and if you have enough time and patience, you can probably make one that is near perfect. Four months ago, I thought that this sack of silicon and wires could replace my mother, that it would be like she never even died. I thought I would be able to add to her until she was indistinguishable from the woman who raised me. Now, I don't think I agree. I can't say that it's not perfect for you, but a droid can't surprise you; it can't tell you a story you've never heard. It can only be what you program it to be, know what you program it to know. People aren't like that.

I'm sure that they can handle much more than I put Mom Clone through. I'm sure they can handle dipping their toes in the ocean. I almost let her do it at the beach today, when she said she wanted to swim I almost let her. I knew she wouldn't even feel the frigid February water. I also knew it wasn't something she would come back from. I would have had to carry her waterlogged body back to my car, where it would get my seats all wet. Then I would have to take it up to seven floors in the elevator and let Josh see that the most expensive thing we will ever purchase was ruined because I decided to let a robot go swimming. The only thing Josh would like less than me getting this thing in the first place would be me frivolously destroying it.

When our outings started, I couldn't stand the thought of losing my mom *again*, so I kept everything gentle and safe. Now I wouldn't see it as losing my mom. I would see it as losing an investment.

I saw someone on a forum say that they emailed the company and got their droids memory file deleted. Now their droid is building its own personality, just in the replica body of their loved one. I think I might do that. She seems to want to be someone new anyways.