**Xerox**

Arthur Mandal

At first, nobody noticed there was anything wrong with it. It sat there unobtrusively, like a quiet child in an unruly class, shipped in as a gift from a branch office somewhere that had had to close. The legal department was like all legal departments: gossip, drama, power games. Details were paramount, mistakes never forgiven. Two bosses warred back and forth across the office space like medieval warlords of adjacent fiefdoms.

The mistakes were so small, so crucial, so discreet, that three people had to be fired before anyone realized who was to blame. An entire copyright suit got derailed because of a misspelled surname; a wrong verb deferred a case against the state regulator for almost six months; a misplaced point turned a compensation verdict into chickenfeed.

Once people understood the source of the problem, patterns started to emerge. It didn’t like aggression, or greed. Certain nouns – “remuneration,” “intimidation,” “due cost,” “demand” – seldom survived its incandescent blink intact. It also took exception to accountancy firms, certain Christian names – Gabriel, Joseph, Michael – and anything to do with the state of Alabama. Nobody trusted the machine with corporate audits – they had to be done on another floor.

The problem was too absurd to even be acknowledged. Three times, within the same month, it was completely taken apart and put together again. The screen was cleaned, then replaced. Almost everyone in the building had tried to plug and unplug its grey, plastic, obstinate heart. An argument grew as to whether the machine was diabolical or angelic. One group saw it as satanic, delaying retribution, confounding justice; others saw it as heroic, thwarting the designs of an evil, fallen, greedy world.

A week before it disappeared, they brought in a priest to exorcise it, mostly as a joke. It was understood to be a joke. The priest sat in the office with both of the directors and drank a coffee with their wives.

Nobody knew who took the machine away, or indeed how. It must have known something was going to happen to it, because in the very last week of its life, the machine didn’t make a single error. The snowstorm which had stopped the town for a week came to an end the night before, so that an entire day’s worth of warm sunshine fell on it from morning to evening through the office windows. Two enormous rectangles of blue, framed only by a water tower and a gas station, was quite possibly the last sight it ever saw.