
STEPHEN
KING

RIDING
THE
BULLET

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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY SHASTI O'LEARY
COVER DESIGN BY JOHN FONTANA
TEXT DESIGN BY ERICH HOBGING

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I've never told anyone this story, and never thought I would—not because I was afraid of being disbelieved, exactly, but because I was ashamed . . . and because it was *mine*. I've always felt that telling it would cheapen both me and the story itself, make it smaller and more mundane, no more than a camp counselor's ghost story told before lights-out. I think I was also afraid that if I told it, heard it with my own ears, I might start to disbelieve it myself. But since my mother died I haven't been able to sleep very well. I doze off and then snap back again, wide awake and shivering. Leaving the bedside lamp on helps, but not as much as you might think. There are so many more shadows at night, have you ever noticed that? Even with a light on there are so

many shadows. The long ones could be the shadows of anything, you think.

Anything at all.

I was a junior at the University of Maine when Mrs. McCurdy called about ma. My father died when I was too young to remember him and I was an only child, so it was just Alan and Jean Parker against the world. Mrs. McCurdy, who lived just up the road, called at the apartment I shared with three other guys. She had gotten the number off the magnetic minder-board ma kept on her fridge.

"'Twas a stroke," she said in that long and drawling Yankee accent of hers. "Happened at the restaurant. But don't you go flyin off all half-cocked. Doctor says it wa'ant too bad. She's awake and she's talkin."

"Yeah, but is she making sense?" I asked. I was trying to sound calm, even amused, but my heart was beating fast and the living room suddenly felt too warm. I had the apartment all to myself; it was Wednesday, and both my roomies had classes all day.

"Oh, ayuh. First thing she said was for me to call you but not to scare you. That's pretty sensible, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah." But of course I *was* scared. When someone calls and tells you your mother's been taken

from work to the hospital in an ambulance, how else are you supposed to feel?

"She said for you to stay right there and mind your schoolin until the weekend. She said you could come then, if you didn't have too much studyin t'do."

Sure, I thought. Fat chance. I'd just stay here in this ratty, beer-smelling apartment while my mother lay in a hospital bed a hundred miles south, maybe dying.

"She's still a young woman, your ma," Mrs. McCurdy said. "It's just that she's let herself get awful heavy these last few years, and she's got the hypertension. Plus the cigarettes. She's goin to have to give up the smokes."

I doubted if she would, though, stroke or no stroke, and about that I was right—my mother loved her smokes. I thanked Mrs. McCurdy for calling.

"First thing I did when I got home," she said. "So when are you coming, Alan? Sad'dy?" There was a sly note in her voice that suggested she knew better.

I looked out the window at a perfect afternoon in October: bright blue New England sky over trees that were shaking down their yellow leaves onto Mill Street. Then I glanced at my watch. Twenty past three. I'd just been on my way out to my four o'clock philosophy seminar when the phone rang.

"You kidding?" I asked. "I'll be there tonight."

Her laughter was dry and a little cracked around the edges—Mrs. McCurdy was a great one to talk about giving up the cigarettes, her and her Winstons. “Good boy! You’ll go straight to the hospital, won’t you, then drive out to the house?”

“I guess so, yeah,” I said. I saw no sense in telling Mrs. McCurdy that there was something wrong with the transmission of my old car, and it wasn’t going anywhere but the driveway for the foreseeable future. I’d hitchhike down to Lewiston, then out to our little house in Harlow if it wasn’t too late. If it was, I’d snooze in one of the hospital lounges. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d ridden my thumb home from school. Or slept sitting up with my head leaning against a Coke machine, for that matter.

“I’ll make sure the key’s under the red wheelbarrow,” she said. “You know where I mean, don’t you?”

“Sure.” My mother kept an old red wheelbarrow by the door to the back shed; in the summer it foamed with flowers. Thinking of it for some reason brought Mrs. McCurdy’s news home to me as a true fact: my mother was in the hospital, the little house in Harlow where I’d grown up was going to be dark tonight—there was no one there to turn on the lights after the sun went down. Mrs. McCurdy could say she was young, but when you’re just twenty-one yourself, forty-eight seems ancient.

“Be careful, Alan. Don’t speed.”

My speed, of course, would be up to whoever I hooked a ride with, and I personally hoped that whoever it was would go like hell. As far as I was concerned, I couldn’t get to Central Maine Medical Center fast enough. Still, there was no sense worrying Mrs. McCurdy.

“I won’t. Thanks.”

“Welcome,” she said. “Your ma’s going to be just fine. And won’t she be some happy to see you.”

I hung up, then scribbled a note saying what had happened and where I was going. I asked Hector Passmore, the more responsible of my roommates, to call my adviser and ask him to tell my instructors what was up so I wouldn’t get whacked for cutting—two or three of my teachers were real bears about that. Then I stuffed a change of clothes into my backpack, added my dog-eared copy of *Introduction to Philosophy*, and headed out. I dropped the course the following week, although I had been doing quite well in it. The way I looked at the world changed that night, changed quite a lot, and nothing in my philosophy textbook seemed to fit the changes. I came to understand that there are things underneath, you see—*underneath*—and no book can explain what they are. I think that sometimes it’s best to just forget those things are there. If you can, that is.







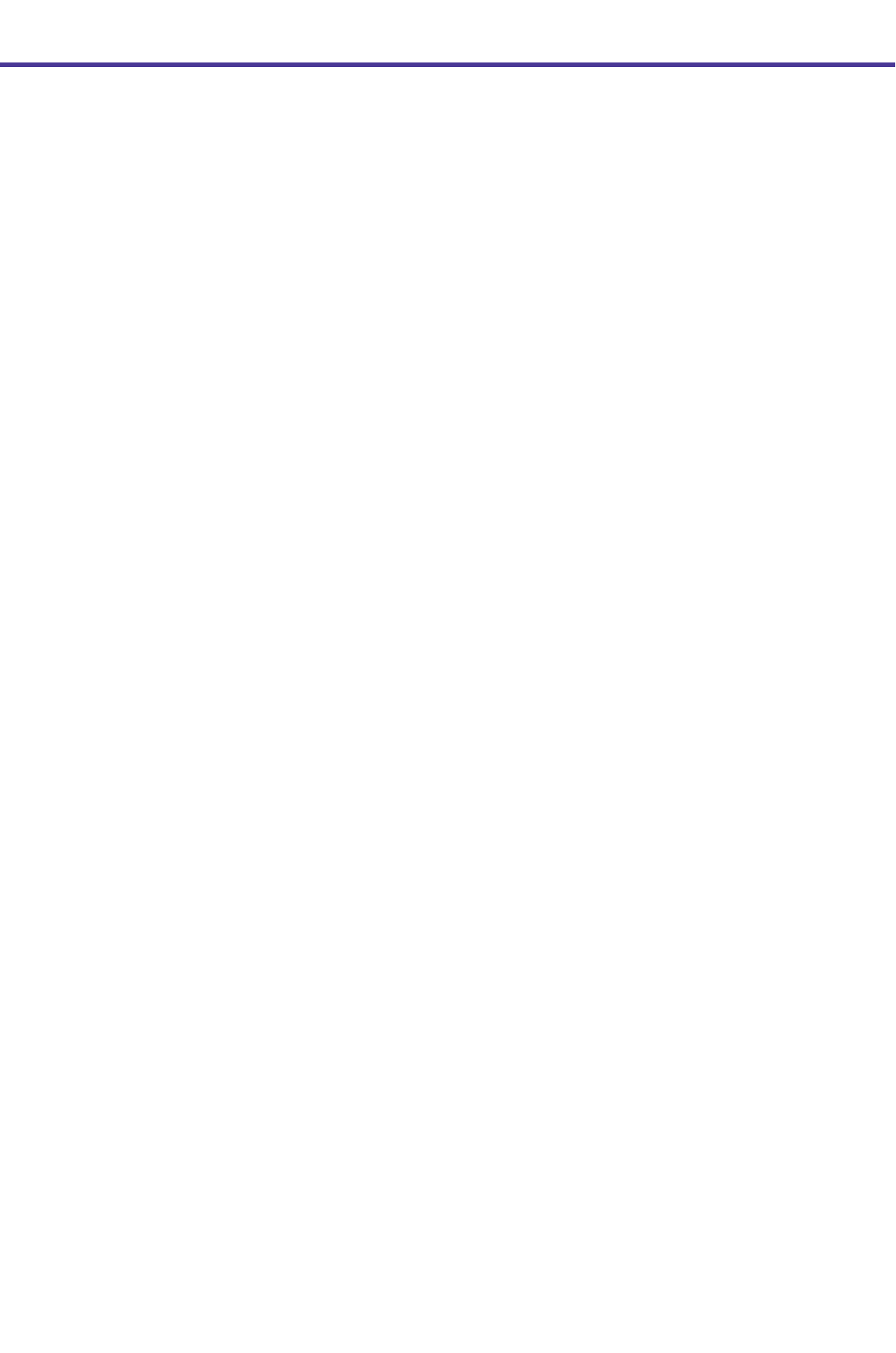






















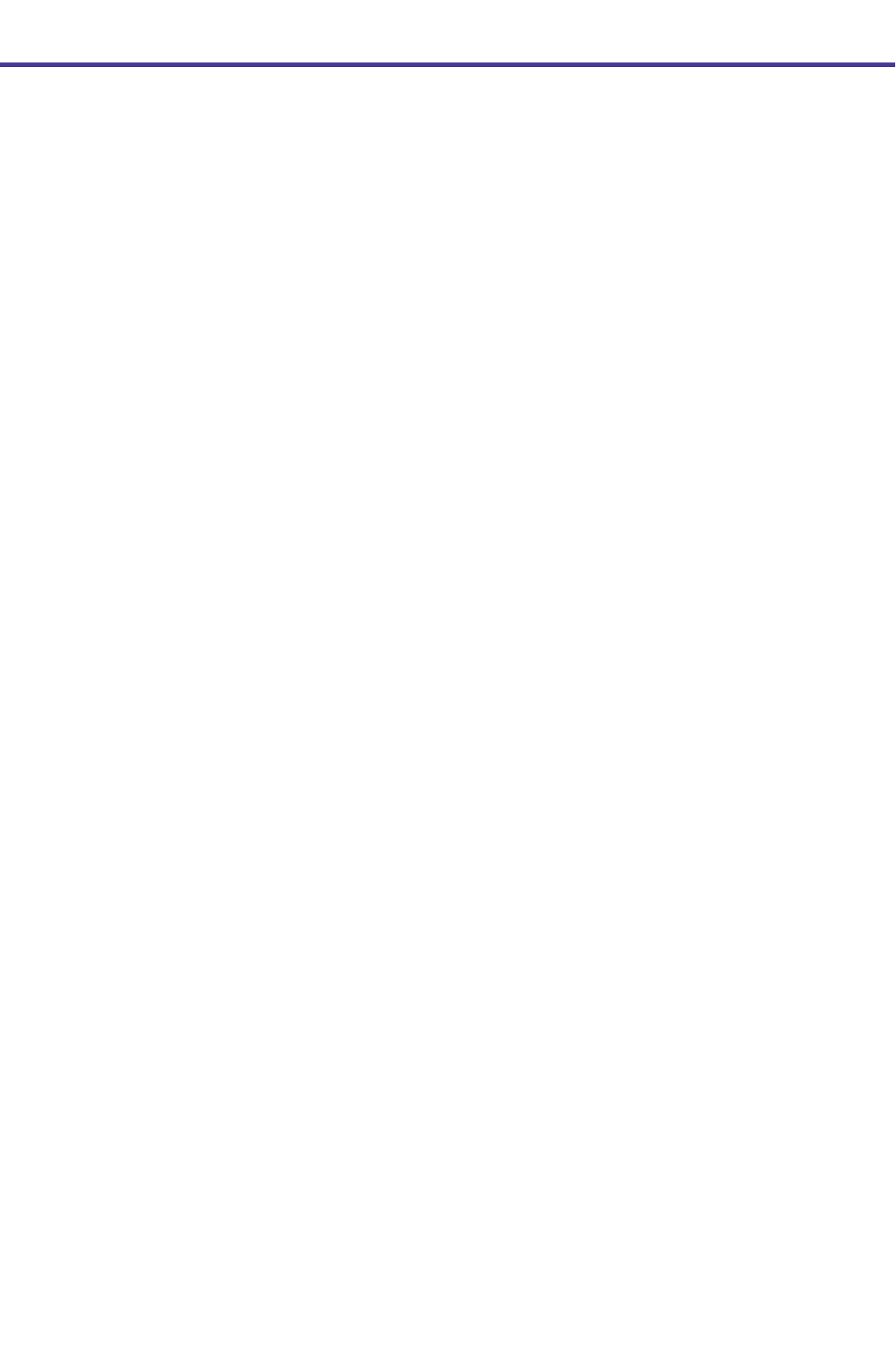




















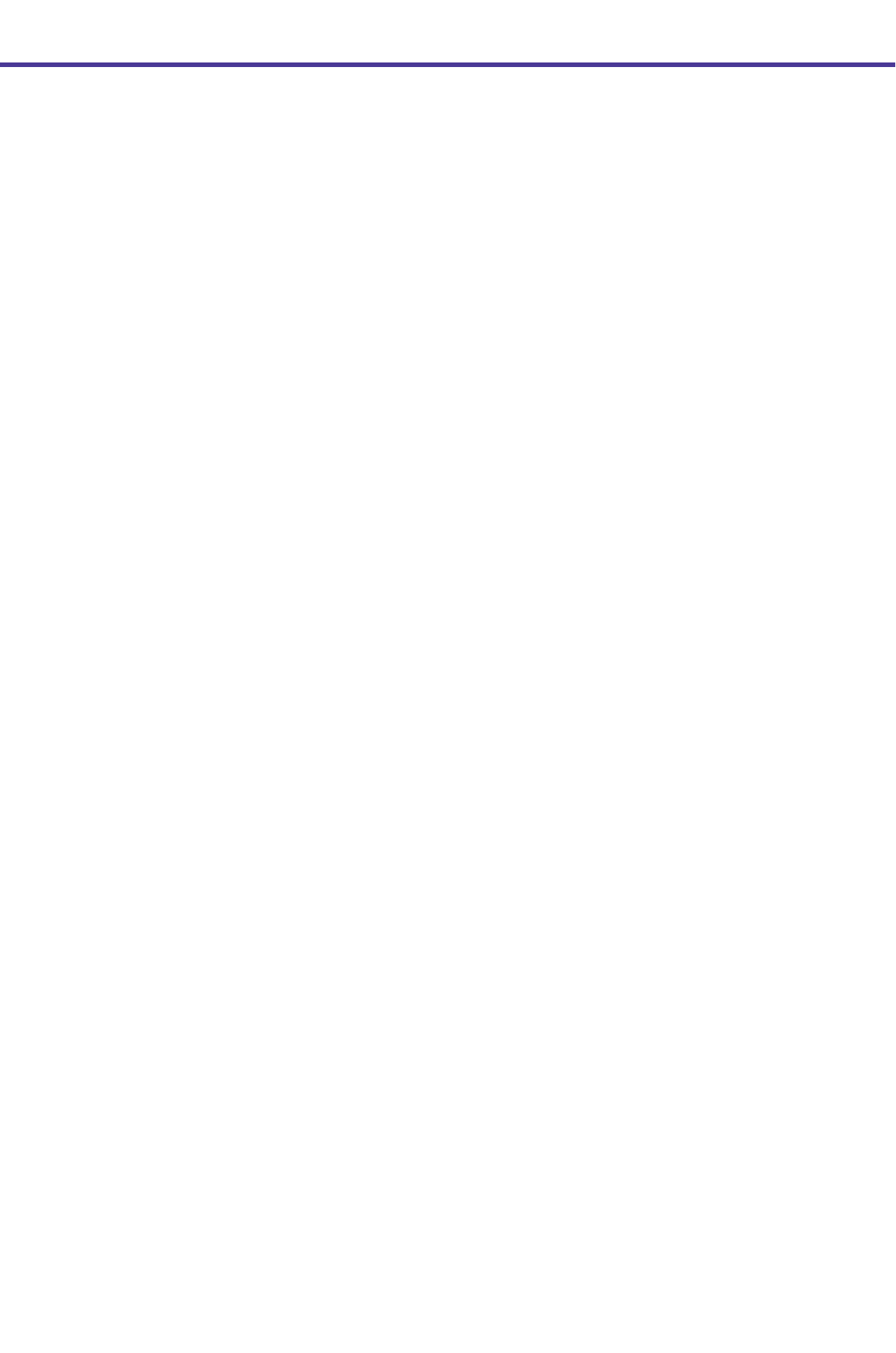


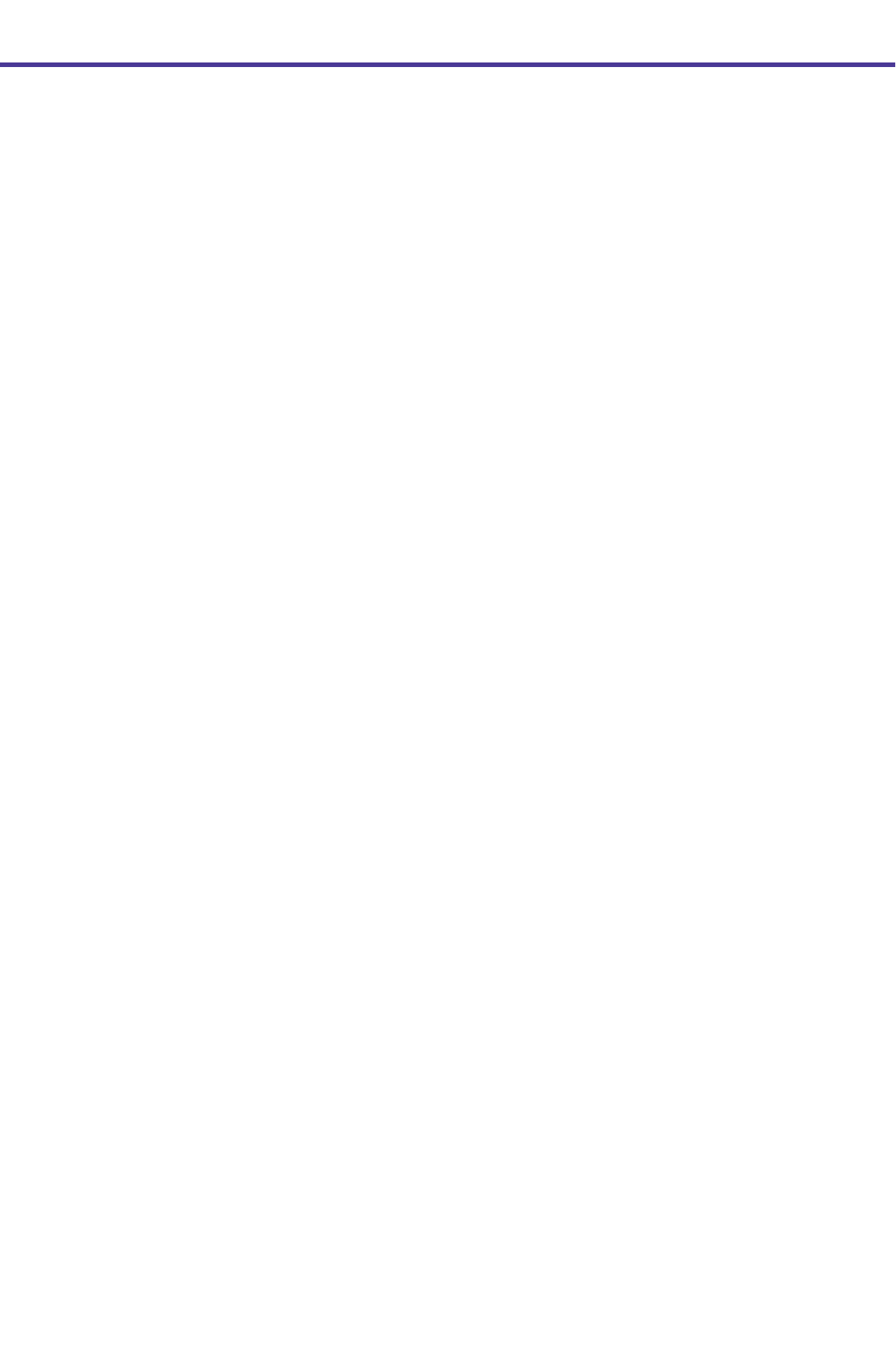












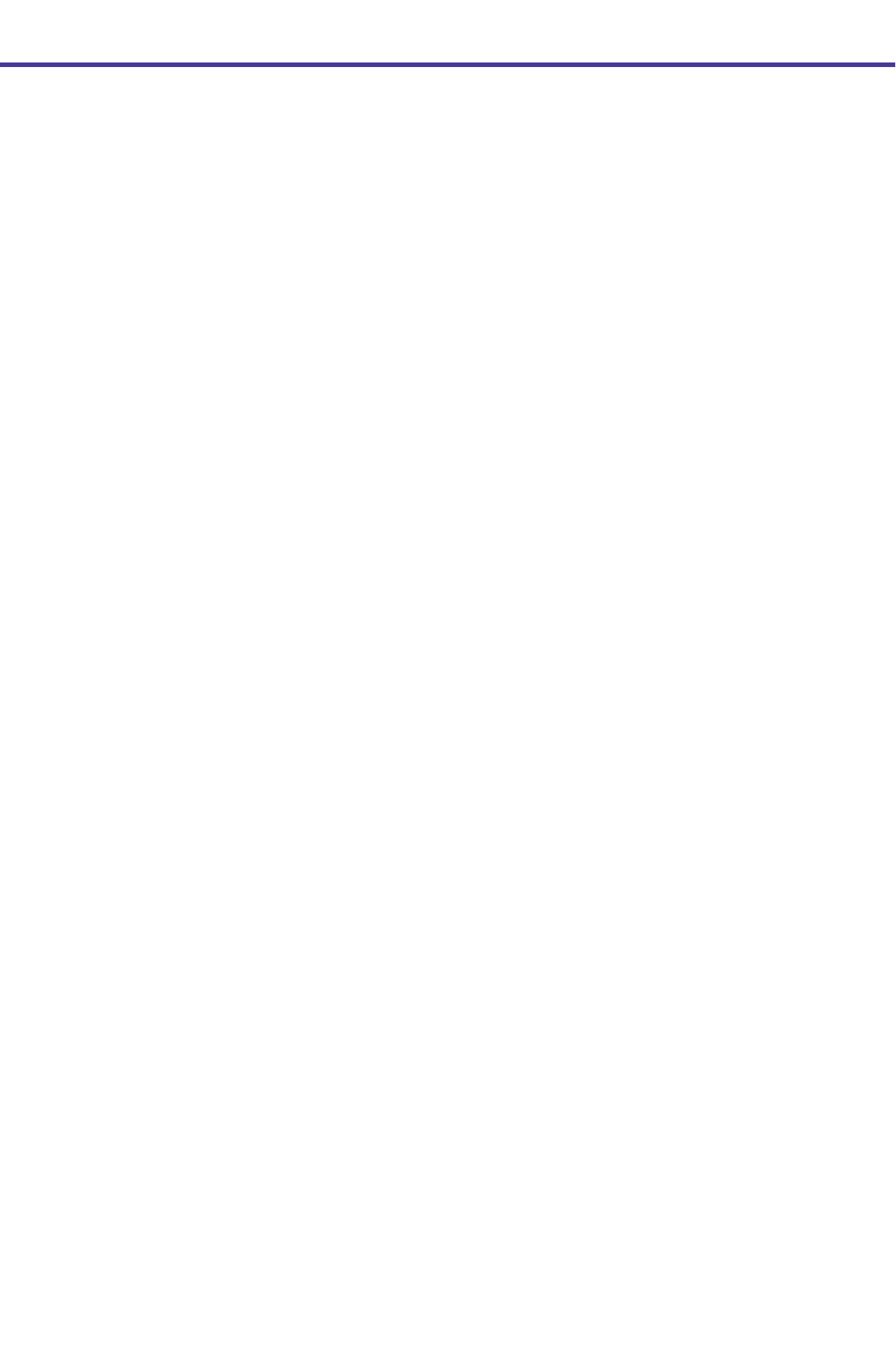




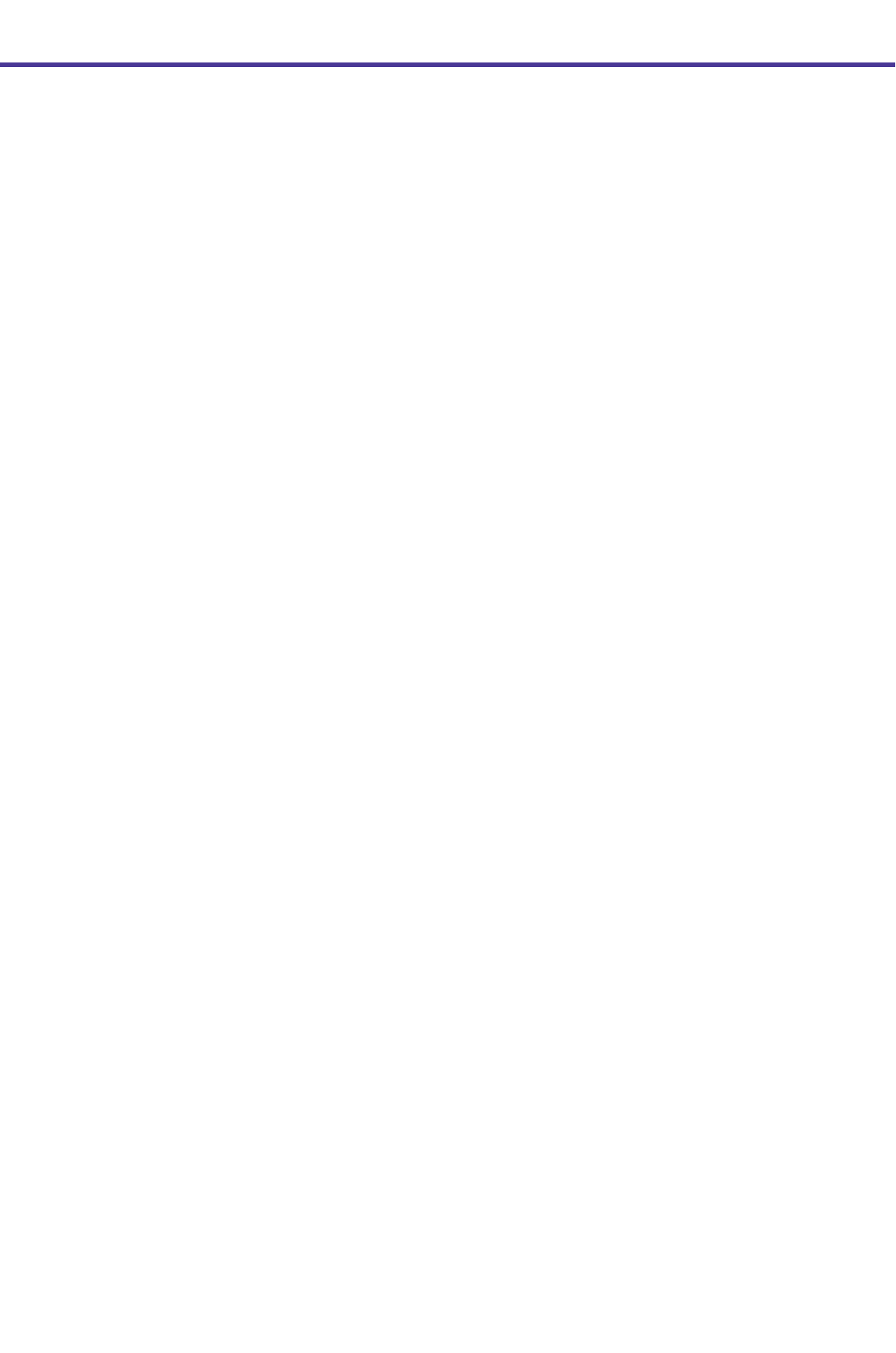


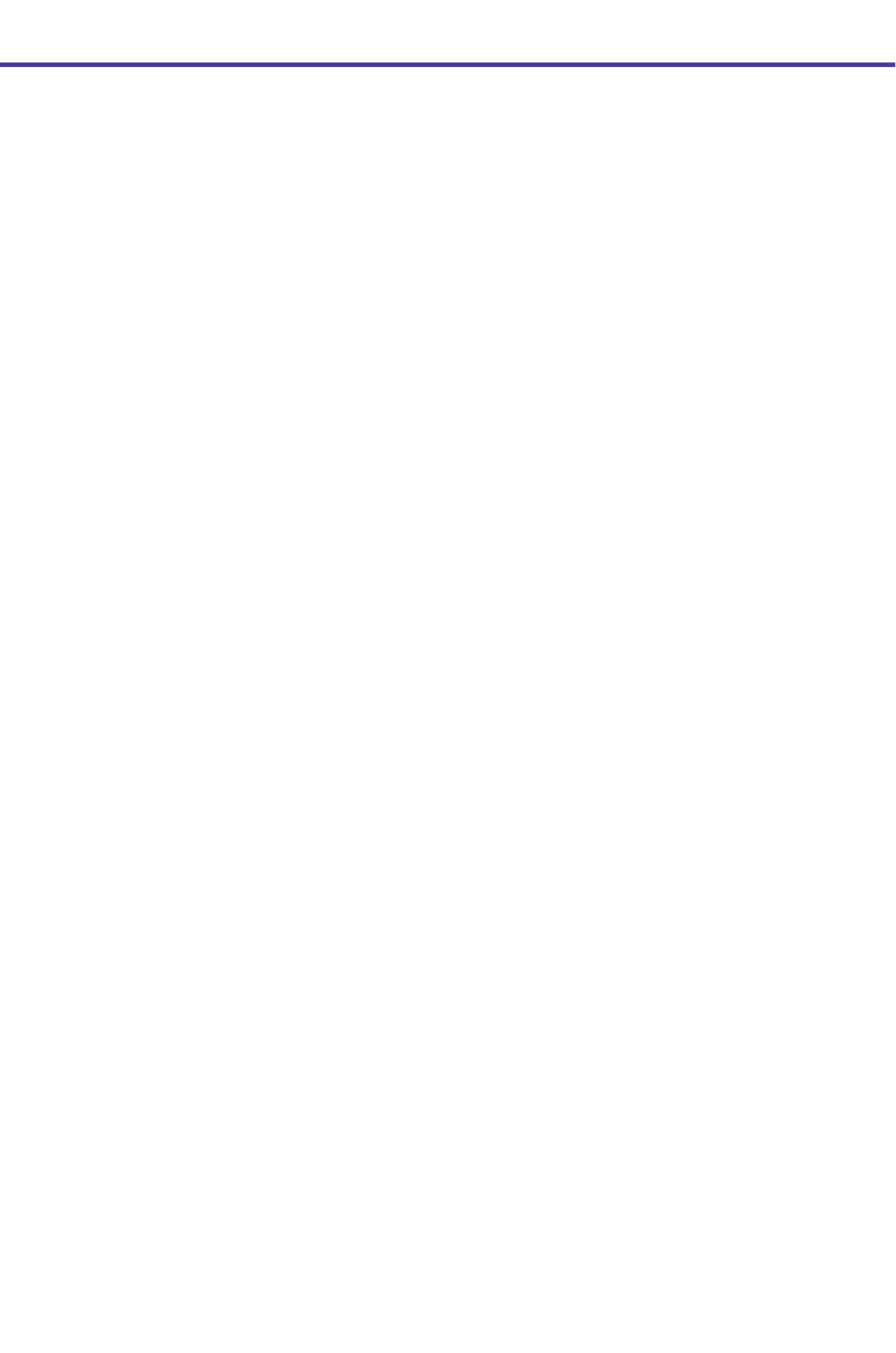




















































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