“Camera! Quick!” Raj cried out as he jerked the tourist van over to the side of the road. Like the others, I photographed the sight before I understood what it was. An elderly Indian man rolling over and over down the gravel-ridden side of the road, followed by a younger man dragging a cart containing all of their worldly belongings. By this point in my journey, I could tell they were pilgrims by their style of dress and the colorful flags that adorned their cart. But so far we had only seen pedestrian pilgrims, walking many kilometers each blazing hot day, barefoot, with nothing to protect them from the elements, save one small bag the women carried on their heads. Raj explained that this man, the rolling man, was a rare sight. The most devout of the devout Hindis, this man would be rolling kilometer after kilometer, hour after hour, day after one hundred and twenty degree day until he reached the temple at Pushkar. As the Tirth Raj, the king of all pilgrimage sites, Pushkar is considered the fifth sacred dham, the final temple, Lord Brahma’s temple, that he must visit in order achieve salvation. This man is going to meet his god. Bare feet, bare legs, bare arms. Gravel and hot pavement. Rolling. My stomach sank as I realized, this is a culture and a religion I will never understand.

Of the eleven hundred pictures I took during my month in India, this one snapshot of the rolling man is the one I can’t stop looking at. I’m done with the forts, the desert, even the majestic Taj Mahal. It’s all about the rolling man. When I show people the pictures of my trip, it is the sites they want to see, but it’s the rolling man I want to talk about. I find myself disappointed when others fail to see the intrigue of this man, who despite living in the most poverty-laden country in the world feels the need to cause himself undeniable suffering in the name of religion. So I flip to the next photograph, to make others more comfortable, and begin talking about the Lotus Temple, one of the hundreds of breathtaking spiritual centers in this country of a thousand gods. My friends are instantly engaged in the architecture, but they’ve lost me. I do not tell them that it is the rolling man who hangs on the wall next to my bed for fear of what they might think of me. I don’t share that it is the rolling man that I look
at every night before I sleep and every morning as I stumble out of bed to find purpose in each day. I don't talk about how I find myself mesmerized by his posture, lying on his back, looking up to his heaven. Arms raised above his head, forever frozen in the photograph to appear as if he's defending himself from a potentially lethal blow from above. Why can't I get him out of my thoughts? What am I supposed to learn from him? This man, whom I will never get to meet, this rolling man, has caused such deep reflection in the heart of a young woman who travelled so far in an effort to come back home to herself.

On one hand, he brings me tremendous sorrow. If I had that moment back, I don't know that I would be so quick to take the picture. I feel sad that such an elderly man would inflict such torture on himself, when he clearly hasn't been afforded a very comfortable life to begin with. I worry about his body - even if he makes it to his destination this time, will he be strong enough to attempt the journey again next year? How will that affect his faith? And, ultimately, what could he have done, what horrendous sin could he possibly have committed that he has deemed himself worthy of such earthly punishment in order to gain spiritual redemption?

On the other hand, I stand in awe. Awestruck at someone so passionate about, committed to, and invested in a belief system that all thoughts of physical concerns would vanish from his consciousness. No worries about his shelter, nourishment, bodily pain. And more shocking than that, he has absolutely no doubt that his efforts will be rewarded in the end. Only the act of rolling is on his mind. Only getting to the temple. One circle after another. And once he gets there, he will be free.

I've spent a lot of time over the past year thinking about the rolling man, what I would ask him if we ever got the opportunity to speak. I know our languages and cultures would get in the way, and despite my best intentions he would probably misinterpret the desperation in my voice when I ask, “How do you know this will work? Is there some spiritual agreement that I don’t know about? Is there a larger cosmic contract whereby you can agree to sacrifice several layers of skin in order to gain the eternal contentment of your soul?” If so, sign me up. I will gladly donate every pair of Nikes I have ever owned to the program that recycles them into playgrounds for needy children and I will walk barefoot from here to Arizona beneath the hot July sun. Because, I’ve got to tell you, rolling man, it feels like I’ve been walking barefoot my whole life. Not knowing where I’m going, what I’ve done wrong, or fully believing that my efforts will be rewarded when I finally reach my destination, but I’ve been walking.

Of course, in reality, I’ve been rolling. I’ve been rolling for years, a self-inflicted torture test to prove I’m good enough, loveable enough, worthy of being saved. I’ve come to realize that I understand this culture and religion quite well. I’ve been rolling to my god for far too long. I haven’t sacrificed skin, but how many hundreds of pounds, how many layers of fat have I put on and taken off in an attempt to atone for my sins, to make up for my very being. I have rolled my grocery cart down countless aisles looking for love on the shelf. I was rolled on a gurney into an operating room when I was so large I could barely roll myself through the door. Rolls of fat have turned into rolls of skin. Negativity keeps rolling loathsome thoughts over and over and over in my brain every second of every day, circumventing any chance of progress. The treadmill rolls on, I run on, in the same circle, never getting anywhere. I’m no closer to the temple, but my various methods of rolling occupy my entire life and have eaten up my entire spirit. I might as well be a hamster in its wheel. The eternal contentment of my soul remains ever elusive, just out of reach, as I worship my religion of food and self-torture. So the question remains, rolling man, and please trust that your answer is more priceless to me than ten million rupees: If I run one more mile, lose five more pounds, roll my corpse over one more gravel-studded kilometer, will it be enough? Will I be enough?