

As O'Sullivan potted the last ball at precisely 20.39, which won him the game; the tournament; the world championship; Steve slumped back in his chair, his nose now broken and his top lip split. He held his hands to his face as a mixture of blood and snot dripped from his chin.

"What the fuck!" Caused some of it to enter his mouth giving him that instant metallic taste.

As he sat forward reflexively cupping his nose with his hands a second blow caught him across the back of the head sending him sprawling across the floor, upending the coffee table and its banquet of junk food and cheap beer. As he rolled over onto his back holding his now dazed head a third strike smashed him across the face again, shattering most of his front teeth. He rolled away from the strike and laboured up onto all fours in the vain hope of creating some distance between him and his attacker by scurrying over to the door. He hadn't realised yet that his assailant was Norris, thinking instead that the two of them were being attacked by some unknown intruder. He knew it couldn't be Norris as he was his best friend now; his only friend.

He managed to get to his feet and turned to see what had happened to his mate when the 57" of pure ash hit him full force across the now exposed mass of fat he called a stomach. Fortunately it absorbed most of the impact but not enough to stop him doubling over through natural reaction. As he did so the heavy end of the weapon delivered the final blow that would render him unconscious.

When he came round the telly was still on but the championship celebrations had been replaced by a familiar but amateurish film of another snooker tournament. In his daze unrealistic but wishful thoughts entered his mind that all this was a result of him and Kev drinking too much beer and he'd passed out temporarily and dreamt of some grotesque brutal attack that he'd watched in the many violent films he had stacked up on his shelves that passed for entertainment in his lonely, insular world. The pain that slowly filtered into his thalamus put paid to that idea. Then the images associated with that pain formed lucidly in his head. His moans were stifled by what he thought was congealed blood in his mouth but then he came to realise that something was stuffed in it. He tried to move only to find his hands and legs tied to what was underneath him, the now righted coffee table. He also became aware that he was naked.

He tried to look round to see who and where his attacker was and if Kev had suffered the same fate. His range of vision was limited to 180° of lateral scope. Had it gone any further he would have seen Norris standing behind him, still admiring the cue. He looked forward at the TV screen to see film of himself winning a local tournament. He then felt fingers probing up and down either side of his spine, stopping every couple of seconds and then a feeling of something soft being pushed against his skin.