

Mark Behr

Excerpt from *The Smell of Apples*

While we were in the museum, we also looked at the gigantic dinosaurs and the stuffed-up fish. There's a huge black marlin right at the very back of one of the showcases. Once, in the deep-sea at Hangklip, Dad caught a black marlin that was almost a False Bay record.

In one of the smaller showcases there are also some ancient photographs of the Kalk Bay whaling station. I love it when Jan Bandjies tells me old whaling stores, and I wondered whether one of the whalers holding a harpoon in the photograph was one of his ancestors. I told Jan that he should come to the museum one day to look at the photos and to see whether it was his family. Then he could also see how small the harpoons were that the whalers used to kill the whales. When I asked Mum whether we could take Jan to look, she said that we could think of doing that, but she wasn't sure whether Coloureds are allowed into the museum. I told Jan and he said it doesn't matter, and I'm forever making too much of a fuss about the fish anyway. I told him that whales aren't fish, because they have live babies. But Jan said they're close enough to fish to be called fish and from then on I've also been calling them fish.

'I wish they'd catch a whale and stuff it up,' Frikkie said, while we stood looking at the harpoons. He spoke softly because you don't raise your voice in a museum.

'A whale would never fit in here!' I answered.

'Did you know a whale's thing is eight feet long?' Frikkie asked, and I got irritated with him for suddenly thinking he knows something about whales.

'What thing do you mean?' I asked.

He looked at me and said: "Its *thing*, man!" and he patted the front of his school trousers where his John Thomas is. 'Its bloody cock is over eight feet long. Did you know?' I looked up to see whether anyone had heard what he said.

'You're mad, man. Eight feet is taller than Dad...'

'I swear before Jesus Christ it's true!'

'Don't swear like that!' I said.

For a while he was quiet then he said: 'It isn't cursing if you swear on the truth.'

'It is,' I answered. 'Our Sunday-school teacher says it's a sin even when you just say *Good Lord*.'

By the time we got outside into the bright sunlight, Frikkie was still going on: 'Well, when my dad's angry he sometimes says *Jesus Christ*.'

'Then your dad's going to hell one day,' I said, because I know that it's one of the greatest commandments, never to take the name of the Lord in vain. It's one of those sins where the punishment gets carried from one generation to the next. Even if you don't take the name of the Lord in vain yourself, but your great grandfather did, you'll still be punished for it.

'Are you trying to say my dad's going to hell?' Frikkie asked, and came to a standstill with his hands on his hips.

'Exactly,' I said, and carried on walking up Victoria Road with Lions Head in the distance. He followed when I spoke again: 'And all of you will end up going as well... Your mother and you and Lou-Marie and I think Gloria – and even Chaka – because the Bible says: You and your whole family together with your servants and your livestock will burn in the everlasting fire. I think dogs, like Chaka, are included under livestock.'

He was quiet for a while. When we turned up Orange Street towards Table Mountain, he said: 'Tonight I'm going to tell my dad you say he's going to hell.' And he walked up ahead of me.

I made as if I didn't care, even though I wasn't sure what would happen if he told his father. I caught up with him and said: 'If you tell your dad, then I'll tell my dad that you said bloody cock.' When he didn't answer, I added: 'And I'll tell him that you smooched with Zelda Kemp.'

'You liar! When did I smooch her?'

“At the tidal pool. Last time we were there. I saw you, you were holding her hand underwater.’

‘You liar! It’s you she’s after. You felt all sorry for her when she howled about nothing at your birthday party...’

“You’re crazy, Frikkie,’ I said, and we walked home in silence.

As we went through their garden gate it was Frikkie who spoke first: ‘If you don’t say anything about the cock, then I won’t say anything about the hell.’