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TABLE TALK Jane Moore

We've all suffered from EPS at one time or another — otherwise known as Embarrassing Parent Syndrome. Top of my list of teenage jaw-droppers, and for ever etched on my mind, is the day that my mother wore a jaunty red corduroy cap of the type favoured by Donny Osmond. Worse — oh God, the shame — she wore it to the parents' evening at school. There followed a six-month period in my life when everything she said, didn't say, wore or didn't wear was wrong.

It seems that she got off lightly. These days, the period of misunderstanding between teenagers and "the bill payers", as we're not-so-fondly known in teenspeak, can stretch for years and prompt tantrums that make Mariah Carey look rational.

For all of us with children, there are plenty of those defining moments when we finally come to sympathise with the plight of our own parents. Whether it's uttering perennial statements such as "They don't write good tunes any more", or "I don't care what everyone else does, you are *not* leaving the house looking like that", or finding yourself pacing the hallway when they're an hour late and haven't called, it all adds up to making you feel depressingly old and part of a never-ending life pattern that you are powerless to resist.

The Bloke and I have two daughters; his is nearly 15 and mine is nine. The latter is still young enough to find him amusing, but the former is mortified by his every word and deed. On the day of this review, he found himself dragged into various clothes shops and then proceeded, as per usual, to sit slowly decomposing by the door while the girls rifled through endless racks.

Occasionally, he rebels, and this was one such occasion. In Topshop, the torturous strains of some unidentifiable rap act gave way to the Bee Gees' Night Fever, and that was it — he was up on his feet.

His daughter had a terrible dilemma. She desperately wanted the T-shirt in her hand, but the man holding the vital credit cards was doing a John Travolta impersonation slap-bang in the middle of the shop floor. "I'm going to call ChildLine," she snapped, flinging the T-shirt back on a shelf and stomping out onto Oxford Street.

As he works in the music business, he's a terrible contradiction for her. He's "cool Dad" because he can get her tickets for pretty much any concert. But he invariably goes along and spoils the occasion by being, to quote teenspeak again, "muppet Dad".

Her most knuckle-gnawingly awful moment came at this year's Brit awards when her all-time hero, Eminem, was sitting on the table next to us. Cleaving



a path through the bodyguards. The Bloke strode up to him, shook his hand and said: "I may not be so shiny, but I'm very shady." Even now, even in his daughter's body involuntarily clenches at the mention of it.

Anyway, once we'd extricated our own Kevin and Perry from the chaos of Oxford Street, we dragged them to see the new film version of the Apes. Appropriate really, a reluctant gait of dropped head and low-swinging arms was reminding me of two orang-utans.

In the event, they loved it, and the Bloke blotted his copybook by marching up to his daughter in the queue and saying loudly: "I loved your film. Can I have your autograph?"

So, there was a moody silence over us as we arrived at Masala, the latest venture from the owners of Chutney Mary and Veeraswami. Its up-market sister restaurants here is that of a casual Indian restaurant with reasonable prices. To enhance the drop-in feel, it doesn't take res-



Indian supper: Masala Zone will have you going back for more

unremarkable alone, but when eaten with the accompanying tomato, red onion and coriander paste were outstanding. The Bloke had also tikki chaat, which is a spiced potato cake with yoghurt and chutney. It was rather heavy on the yoghurt, but delicious.

On the recommendation of the waiter, we also sampled a plate of dahi puri: puffed hollow biscuits filled with chickpeas, mashed potato and splashed with yoghurt and chutneys.

"The tradition is to eat them whole," said the waiter. Easier said than done, unless you have a snake-like ability to dislocate your lower jaw. However, if you simply bite into them, the whole thing disintegrates, leaving you looking very Care in the Community with bits of chickpea dribbling from your mouth. Whichever way you eat them, they're well worth having.

For the main course, I had the Cochin coconut bowl, which consisted of chicken and flat noodles cooked in a white coconut soup flavoured with curry leaves, ginger and cardamom. It was exceptionally good. The Bloke opted for a classic lamb masala with fragrant white rice, the latter plonked in the middle of the curry whether you wanted that much of it or not. As a bit of a curry connoisseur, he deemed it passable.

The girls both had chicken noodles with fresh greens, stir-fried in a mild curried sauce. It goes without saying that most of the greens were picked out and left on the side, but the rest was wolfed down.

The wine list is what you might expect from such a casual restaurant; the most expensive white being a South Australian chardonnay at £15, the red a Côtes du Rhône at the same price. If you fancy something a little different, there's a fat-free version of the traditional Indian drink chaas — a lassi with coriander leaves and cumin seeds.

The clientele are an eclectic bunch of office workers, Indian families (a good sign), ubiquitous tourists, and those, like us, who drop in after a day's shopping or a cinema trip.

But, unlike so many similar establishments in this area, Masala Zone is clearly hoping to attract repeat visits. And it's going about it the right way: the prices are reasonable (about £10-£15 per head), the food is good, and the staff are extremely helpful. Better still, they are knowledgeable about the various dishes and their suitability for different tastes.

When the children asked our waitress if she could have the Bloke removed from the premises for embarrassing behaviour, she promptly returned to the table with a male colleague who joked: "Excuse me sir, I understand you're bothering these children..."

At least, I think he was joking.

A A Gill is away

Formerly the site of a Cranks health-food shop, the decor is an easy-come, easy-go canteen style, with plenty of tables and bright lighting to lure you in from the otherwise unremarkable Marshall Street, an area that's neither here nor there, tucked behind the

brasher Camaby Street. The walls are covered in a biscuit-coloured Artex, decorated with white child-like pictures that resemble cave drawings, and the floors are easy-to-clean linoleum. There are booths lining the outside walls with grey raffia seating, and a central area of basic wooden tables with bench seating and strip lights.

It's not a venue for those seeking discreet surroundings, but if you have two children and an unpredictable adult in tow, it's perfect. The menu is extensive enough to accommodate different palates and sizes of appetite, and there's also a "to go" lunch service that includes samosas and sandwiches.

The main menu kicks off with the "small plates of street food" section — starters by any other name — followed by noodle bowls and curry and rice plates. For the more voracious appetite, there's the grand thali: a selection of seven dishes that is flagged as "a complete balanced meal".

To start, I had shikampuri kebab: two minced-lamb croquettes that were

Masala Zone, 9 Marshall Street, W1 (020 7287 9966).
Lunch, Monday-Friday, noon-2.30pm; weekends, noon-3pm. Dinner, Monday-Saturday, 5.30pm-11pm; Sunday, 6pm-10.30pm

THIS WEEK'S STAR-RATING GUIDE:
 ★★★★★ Wicked ★★★★★ Cool
 ★★★ Buff ★★ Poop ★ Mingling