



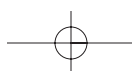
# Masculine, Singular

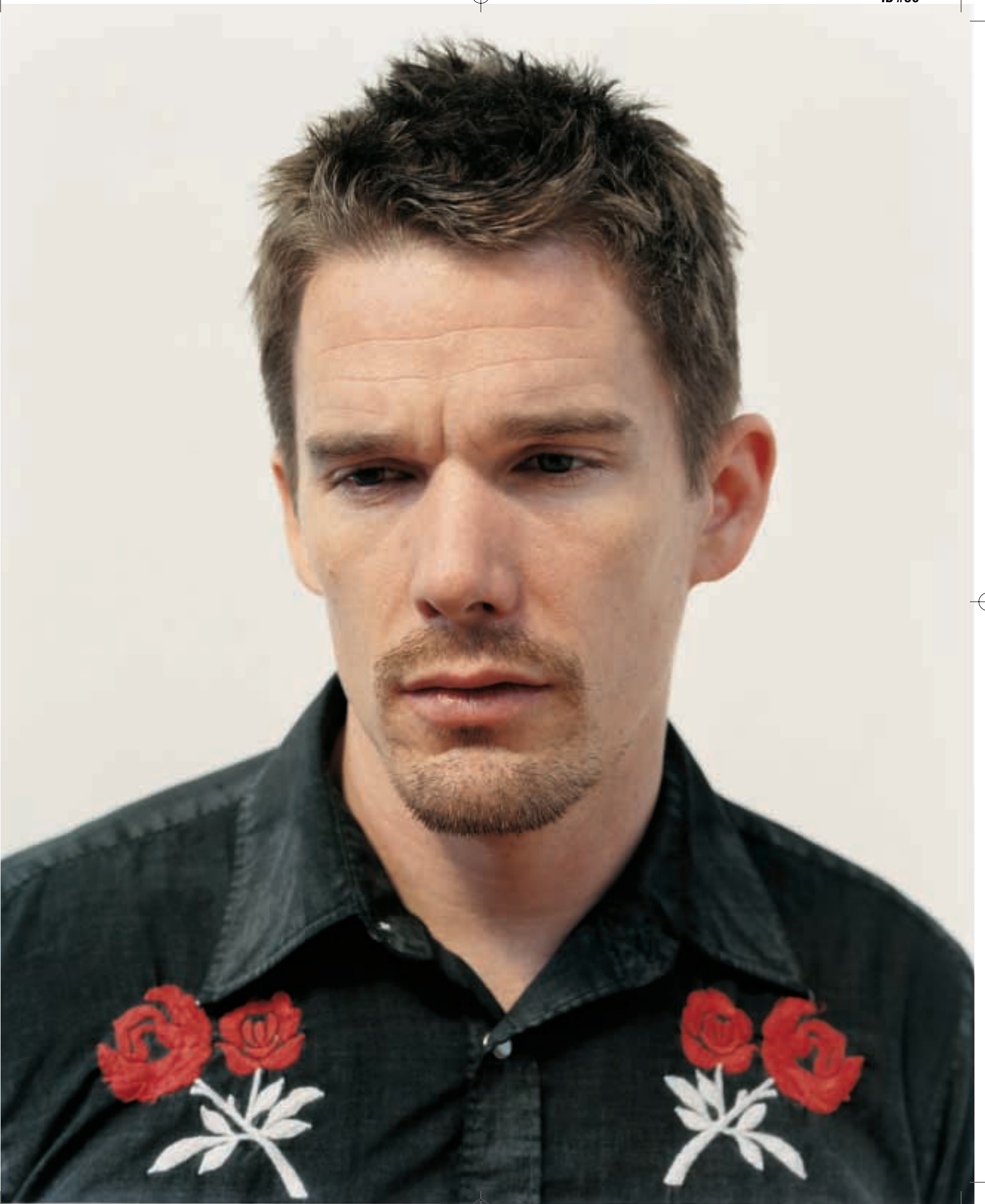
Ethan Hawke is all grown-up. But now the star of *Before Sunset* has to deal with the messy trappings of adulthood: a very public divorce and many Big Questions to ponder.

**BY TOM ROSTON**  
Photographs by Dana Lixenberg

**ETHAN HAWKE IS TALKING ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAN.** He's currently on a screed about how his new movie, *Before Sunset*, has informed his thinking. "There's this thing that our characters say about what a weird place the contemporary male is in. You want to be the provider for your family, enjoy the old-school male positionings, and derive positive self-esteem off certain manifestations of a 13-year-old's sense of what it means to be a man." • He stops to take a breath, looking around the bar at New York City's genteel The Players Club, a private social club for thespians and theater lovers created in the 19th century, where he sits under images of Mark Twain playing pool. "All these things are big life questions for the contemporary American

male: When your wife is making money and you start to know that it's bad to be some sort of Neanderthal who doesn't want your woman to have the same dreams that you have . . . But then marriage is a very old dynamic set up on a very old way of behavior. So if the male-female dynamic is going to change, then what is that going to do to the foundation of the institution of marriage?" • Gulp. He's not really expecting an answer, is he? • The topic of marriage came up recently with Robert Sean Leonard—a good friend of Hawke's since they starred in 1989's *Dead Poets Society*—when they had dinner with Leonard's fiancée. She was awed by Hawke's passionate way of talking about marriage. "She said to me later in the cab," Leonard recalls, "God, I've never met anyone who





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just searches for truth the way he does.' He's like, 'I'm with you and you guys are getting married and so let's talk about what's here at this table.'"

The subject has been on Hawke's mind lately. After all, he's in the midst of a very public breakup from his wife of five years, Uma Thurman. But it seems a little . . . odd—and not quite in his self-interest—to be delving so honestly into the subject with a journalist.

"He doesn't run from the moment," explains Leonard. "He bravely walks into it and expresses himself. And risks sounding pretentious or being rejected or whatever—he doesn't shy away from it."

It brings to mind that old line from *Dead Poets*, carpe diem, seize the day.

"Yeah. If someone asked me which friend that phrase reminded me of, I wouldn't hesitate," Leonard says. "I mean, look at his life."

**PLAYING WITH THE STRAW IN HIS CRANBERRY JUICE AND WEARING** a plaid shirt and jeans, the 33-year-old actor enthuses about his latest role, as Jesse in *Before Sunset*, which opens on July 2. The movie is a sequel to 1995's *Before Sunrise*, in which Jesse meets Celine, played by French actress Julie Delpy, on a train, and the two spend a whirlwind day-and-night falling in love as they walk and talk through the streets of Vienna. They choose to go their separate ways, and set a date six months later to meet again. *Sunset* picks up—as in real time—nine years later in Paris. Both movies are essentially intense conversations between two people. "The truth is that there is so much more of my heart in these movies than any other movies I've done," Hawke says.

It used to be that you could look at his face—the scruffy facial hair and the serious, slightly sad eyebrows that come together to look cool to some

and cocky to others—to read him, but now one's attention is drawn higher, to the deep range of ridges on his forehead. Gossip surrounding Hawke's breakup with his wife, and his reported adultery, has been dogging him for months. And the buzz has been to the decidedly unsympathetic tune of, *How could this dumbass have messed up his marriage to the most perfect, intelligent, and beautiful woman in the world?*

**THE GROUND WAS FERTILE. THERE'S ALWAYS BEEN A CERTAIN** anti-Hawke current in the pop culture ether (just as there has always been a similarly knee-jerk pro-Uma one). It must be something about how he's carried himself ever since he was a teen star, as if he wanted us to know he didn't care what we thought of him. Perhaps it was how he eschewed the paths of most hot young actors (to be either the grateful golden boy or a train-wreck rebel), and instead insisted on taking on such self-serious projects as writing novels (getting paid \$400,000 for 1996's *The Hottest State*), directing arty, ponderous fare (2001's *Chelsea Walls*), and getting married and having children with *the most perfect, intelligent, and beautiful woman in the world* at the age of 27. Or maybe it's just those damn eyebrows and facial hair.

"I felt like the whole arrogant thing is something that stemmed off my character in *Reality Bites*," Hawke says of the 1994 hit that launched him onto the Young Hollywood A-list. "People thought that I thought I was sooo cool because that character thought he was so cool."

And although Hawke would prefer to keep the discussion to *Before Sunset*, that has its pitfalls as well: Jesse is a not-too-distant alter ego of Hawke's. "In a movie that is aspiring for a level of naturalism, you have to

## All Hawke, No Action



### EXPLORERS (1985)

**Hawke:** "It was this incredibly powerful experience. River [Phoenix] was the first vegetarian that I had even heard of. We made the movie, and I came home and it came out and it was a big failure. I had changed schools, so no one in my new school really knew about it. And I went on to watch River become really famous. I was very, very jealous."



### DEAD POETS SOCIETY (1989)

**Leonard:** "We were all just kind of flailing around, but Ethan's passion for the experience was something I'd never seen. He was just on fire with it. He's a bit of a natural leader, and it was odd because I played the leader of our group and he played a shy introvert. I always felt in life we were sort of the opposite of our characters."



### REALITY BITES (1994)

**Hawke:** "What does it mean if Kurt Cobain is Gen-X and Richard Linklater is Gen-X and there's a book called *Generation X* by Doug Coupland, who's ten years older than me? In hindsight, I couldn't really give a rat's ass about that label. What art was valuable from that period still remains to be seen."



### BEFORE SUNRISE (1995)

**Hawke:** "It's a fantasy to meet a French girl on a train. But the reality is that most of us have had the good fortune of connecting with another person—like if you're just walking someone home from a party, and there's a moment when you think, 'Wow, I'm not alone in the universe.'"



### TAPE (2001)

**Hawke:** "Tape was a real breakthrough for me. In my mind, that is when I became an adult actor. My feeling is that when my ride is over, it will be the work that I did with [Tape director Richard] Linklater that will be the only thing that people care about."



### CHELSEA WALLS [director] (2001)

**Hawke:** "My take on that is they gave me \$100,000 and a digital video camera, and I'm really proud of it. That was my grad school in filmmaking. I really wanted to do something experimental and playful so that I could learn a lot, and give myself a situation where I had no commercial expectation so I could do whatever I wanted."



### TRAINING DAY (2001)

**Director Antoine Fuqua:** "I needed somebody who I could put in a car with Denzel Washington. When you put other actors with Denzel, they just drown. They're just not ready. And Ethan was ready."



### TAKING LIVES (2004)

**Hawke:** "I've never played the bad guy. I always get offered to play the moral lead, particularly if it's a Hollywood movie, and I just didn't want to do it anymore. It was a way to act in a mainstream movie that was going to be about acting, where I had a real part to play."



### BEFORE SUNSET (2004)

**Hawke:** "The hook is bumping into an old lover and how it shakes up the reality of how your life is going. . . . It was so fragile. You don't want to make it too syrupy and sweet, and you also don't want to make a cynical film which would be so upsetting to the spirit of *Before Sunrise*, which was so hopeful."



blur the lines a little bit between character and performer,” Hawke says. “If the movie is any good, there are parallels to a lot of people’s lives. Not just mine.”

Like Hawke, Jesse enjoys rapturous discussion about life and ideas. He has also written a book and done a reading at the same bookstore in Paris. And, more to the point, he’s also now in a troubled marriage, teetering toward divorce. At *Sunset*’s premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival last winter, Delpy tried to cope with the uncomfortable similarities. “Ethan’s such a professional actor that he had to get in character, so he had to go all the way and break up his marriage,” she joked.

Actually, it would be a lot more surprising if Hawke were starring as a typical leading man in a typical romance. “You see these romantic movies, and they are so full of deceit. As a man, you watch these things that are just so corrosive for anyone to think that their relationship should be like this,” Hawke

**“Those people think I have some kind of grandiose vision of myself. I mean . . . in my mind, I am trying to have an interesting life.”**

he heard about an open call for *Dead Poets Society*.

Again, without much trouble, he got a lead role.

“Acting grabbed me. I admire people who tell stories about how they waited tables until they were 37. These guys, by the time they’re famous, they know who they are,” says Hawke. “For years, I was really apprehensive about acting in movies that were obvious commercial endeavors because I had to take responsibility for my own education. If you just cash

says. “It’s like smoking crack. It makes you feel good while you do it, but then it leaves you completely dissatisfied when you’re left with reality.”

And although he would like to dodge addressing his current relationship with his wife, you won’t catch Hawke laying down some BS sugarcoating. “What I feel good about *Before Sunset* is that it tries to deal with how much more complicated people’s lives are in their early thirties than in their early twenties,” he says. “Life does get deeper. You sink into it. And it becomes so much more subtle and so much more gray and so much more compromise on every level. And yet, with that, there is a more substantial beauty.”

**FROM THE START, HAWKE HAD** a relatively easy road to success. After his parents divorced when he was three, he lived with his mother, who moved around a fair amount, from Texas to Vermont, among other places, to New Jersey, where the 13-year-old Hawke was asked to play a bit part as a “spear carrier” in a production of George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan* at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton. “I couldn’t believe what these guys did for a living,” he recalls. “All they did was sit around and talk about this play. And they were all acting in TV shows and auditioning in New York. It looked like the best lifestyle, as opposed to my mom, who was working like a dog.”

That, plus having recently read *The Catcher in the Rye*, inspired Hawke to go to the big city for an audition for 1985’s *Explorers*. He got the part. After that movie fizzled at the box office, Hawke auditioned only once (for *Stand by Me*; his *Explorers* costar River Phoenix won the role) before turning 18, when he found himself unhappy studying theater at Carnegie Mellon University and

in at the age of 25, then you're a punk. You're not serious at all. If you're Jack Nicholson and you want to cash in and make *Batman*, then you can."

On the heels of 1994's zeitgeist-defining *Reality Bites*, the 23-year-old Hawke faced just that option. "A lot of young actors in that position would say, 'I can't make a misstep now. I've got to be in a movie that's commercial and does well and further solidifies my star status,'" says Hawke's fellow Generation X poster boy, director Richard Linklater. "I'm not going to do some weird little European art film that might not work."

Linklater is referring to his *Sunrise*, which was Hawke's next job. Although the film had a strong underground following (and a popular one overseas, where the \$2.7 million-budgeted romance for deep thinkers grossed \$17 million), it didn't exactly add luster to Hawke's star power. What followed were a string of similarly interesting films, some better than others, some more sure to cause eye-rolling than others, such as 2000's post-modern version of *Hamlet*, in which Hawke spouts the "to be or not to be" line in a video store.

"If I'm serious about acting, and someone is going to offer me to play Hamlet, is my first thought going to be, 'Oh my God! All those people out there who don't like me are really going to think I'm pretentious now?'" Hawke says. "Those people think I have some kind of grandiose vision of myself. I mean . . . in my mind, I am trying to have an interesting life."

After more than 20 movies over 15 years, Hawke got his first Oscar nod in 2002 for his supporting role in *Training Day* opposite Denzel Washington. It was a part he almost didn't get. "I heard from a lot of people that his time had passed and he didn't want to be a movie star and why would I want Ethan Hawke," says *Training Day* director Antoine Fuqua. "The studio wanted me to meet with other people. The truth is that the people who resisted him wouldn't know a great actor if one punched them upside the head."

What makes Hawke great at what he does, according to Robert Sean Leonard, is his passion. "Actors tend to either get very guarded or cautious, and Ethan takes all the passion of his life and throws it into the scene," he says. "You don't get the sense he's acting. You just get the sense you're shaping this moment in time that you're both creating."

Leonard says Hawke's enthusiasm pulses throughout his life. "Of course he was the first one of our friends to get married. That's bravery—and that's damning the torpedoes and marching into the stream of life." And just because Hawke's marriage may be dissolving doesn't give Leonard pause. "Whatever the repercussions are," he says, "this is life: the spectrum of feeling, from the lowest to the highest."

**THUMPING THE TABLE WITH HIS FINGERS, HAWKE'S GETTING A** little restless. He looks weathered, but he doesn't look wan. In fact, he looks pretty fit. But Hawke demurs. "Try getting a divorce and see what you look like," he says. Today, he's hoping to make it to the gym, but probably won't have time because after his five-year-old daughter, Maya, gets out of school, he's going to take her and her younger brother, Levon, to see *Clifford's Really Big Movie* before going out to dinner. "The trouble with my life right now is that in order to get everything done, it requires an inordinate amount of pre-thought about how my day is going to go," he says.

"This year has been massively distracting," he adds, explaining why he hasn't spent much time on a new novel or why he's had to put off another directing gig. "I'm just trying to settle family issues before I take on something that difficult." He's considering acting in a remake of *Assault on Precinct 13* [production actually begins a month later; Hawke costars with Laurence Fishburne], but mostly, he's just trying to deal with his life.

And that means trying to control some of the spin about his divorce. "All

my motivations regarding anything public about that are angling toward creating a good environment for my children to grow up in," he says.

But his attempts haven't always been fully to his benefit. That's probably bound to happen to a guy who, after reportedly committing adultery, is willing to say things like, "Human sexuality, if you want to talk about it in a sincere way, is really a life's journey of understanding yourself." He's right, but few are going to stop to listen.

He's also right when he says, "Nobody knows anything. They don't know how my wife feels about me. They have no idea. My relationship with my wife is a lot more complicated than . . ." His sentence trails off as he looks down at the table. Hawke looks tired of the subject. "My whole ship is run on the idea to not worry about things I can't control. And I don't think you can control what other people think about you. You're much better off trying to understand yourself."

Again, true, but then he appears a week later on *20/20* looking like a caged animal when the interviewer asks him if it's tough seeing pictures of his wife with another man. For a guy who has always tried to take the high road, isn't this media circus the last place you'd expect to find him?

That's what those who are closest to Hawke are thinking. His mother, Leslie Hawke, who didn't actually see the *20/20* episode when it aired, has this to say in an e-mail from Romania (where she works to enfranchise the Gypsies there; her son helps subsidize the organization, The Alex Fund):

"Ethan has always had an overactive sense of responsibility. For instance, at the age of 14, when his first movie *Explorers* was not a hit, he really felt it was entirely his fault. In any room he's in, he feels it's his responsibility to make the situation 'work'—whether it's a family picnic, an interview, or a movie scene.

"I think he has been so upset about the separation—and handled it with a level of self-sabotage that is uncharacteristic of him—because he does feel so deeply responsible—not because of an infidelity—but because he couldn't make the marriage work. He thought he could do better for his kids than his mother or his grandparents had managed to do . . . i.e., stay married to their mother. But ultimately he couldn't. And so he punishes himself—by being miserable and taking on the role of the 'bad guy.' Ethan is not miserable because he misses his ex-wife; he's miserable because he feels he let his kids down by not making his marriage to their mother work."

Once again flying in the face of what may appear to be his self-interest, Hawke was enthusiastic about providing access to his straight-shooting mother—it seems a rabid drive at getting to the truth runs in the family.

Which brings us back to why he's so pleased with *Sunrise* and *Sunset*. "There's no plot to hide behind. Jesse isn't having a breakdown or has emphysema or is a crackhead. It's just regular life," Hawke says. "Just two naked people walking around."

And of the many themes Jesse and Celine discuss in their nearly 80-minute conversation, which resonates for Hawke the most right now?

"That whole notion of, 'Is the point of your life to overcome your passions? To detach from them? Or to live inside them and learn from them?'" he says. "I know that there's real beauty and real truth in being detached. If your life is led by your passions, you are going to be miserable and you are going to make other people miserable. . . . But where's the line?"

What's he thinking? Doesn't Hawke realize that saying this implies that he's referring to how his own wayward desire got the best of him during his marriage?

No doubt he expects more from us—to focus on the idea, on the meaning of what he's saying, rather than the sordid, gossipy implications. Or, maybe, he just cares too much about what he's saying to care what we think. ■