
HOW WE MET

VICTOR UBOGU AND REBECCA HOSSACK

Victor Ubogu, 31, was born in Lagos; he came to Britain in 1977. He studied at Birmingham and Oxford Universities, and now runs a security company and sports bar. He joined the England rugby union side in 1990 as a prop forward and has been capped 19 times. He lives alone in London.

Rebecca Hossack, 40, was born in Australia. She came to England in 1980, and studied fine art at Christie's. In 1988 she opened the Rebecca Hossack Gallery; she is also Britain's first Australian Cultural Attaché. She lives in London with her husband

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VICTOR UBOGU: About four years ago I went out with a girl called Max, who I'd met at a Rugby Sevens tournament in Dubai, and we stayed friends afterwards and she invited me to a dinner party at her place. I walked into the room and saw Rebecca sitting there, smiling, and I thought: "Wow – I'm glad I'm here!" She was so beautiful; when she smiled her face just lit up. I didn't fall in love with her, but she had a major impact on me. I found out that we had fairly similar backgrounds, in that we both came over to this country in our teens, and that we both had very strong fathers. And we were both on our own in this country, a long way from our homes. In the first instance, when I met her, to be perfectly honest, it was lust. And she was so much fun and so easy to get on with. There seemed nothing fake about her.

I got on very well with her, and I

knew that we were going to be good friends – and we are. At first, we all went out together: Max, Rebecca and I, and then I began to see Rebecca on my own. We don't see that much of each other because she's extremely busy, and so am I, but we just pick up again, immediately. Sometimes we go out to dinner together, or to the opera – we're both very interested in opera, although she knows far more about it than I do. I've seen *La Bohème*, *Peter Grimes* and *Turandot* with her. I got interested in opera relatively recently, after going to Sydney to play rugger.

To be honest, I'm not really arty-minded, although through Rebecca's influence I have bought a few pictures. But I don't really have time to go to many gallery openings or anything like that, because I travel a lot between London and Bath, where I play rugger. I'd like to think I'd taught Rebecca



quite a lot about rugby, but she was brought up on Australian rules football, which is completely different. I don't talk to her that much about sport because I think her interest in sport has dwindled a bit – she used to be very keen on it in Australia. She's not that interested in rugby and I'm not really that interested in art, so we tend to talk about other things.

Rebecca's impossible to get hold of, especially now she's the Aussie cultural attaché. But she knows that I'll always be there for her. She's so happy, she's always happy, that's what I really love about her. She's radiant, and she's so full of energy and she's always positive and she works incredibly hard. Whenever I see her I feel good. She's incredibly direct, she comes right out with things and she speaks her mind all the time. Sometimes it can be irritating, like when she teases me about

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what I wear. She says my clothes are too loud, especially my Versace shirts. But then, I'm not sure about her clothes. I like bright things, she doesn't. Her clothes are very simple, but not brightly coloured. She's much taller than me and she also winds me up about that. And she teases me about my flash car, but then she cycles everywhere on this rickety old bike, which I think is ridiculous. She comes to my bar sometimes, but she usually prefers to meet me somewhere else, because when I'm in Shoeless Joe's I get quite a bit of attention from women, and she finds that annoying, because she feels she's not the focus of my attention. Basically, she knows that I can walk out of there with any girl.

Rebecca can be very emotional; she has a serious short fuse. I'll always remember one thing that she did. I met up with her one Saturday and I'd

been playing rugby and I'd had a few drinks with the boys, so I wasn't at my most sober, and I was really winding her up. I wind her up about the fact that she lives in Fitzrovia, bang in the middle of the town, yet what she really loves doing is being in the garden all day. So I'm always trying to figure it out, why does she live there, when all she wants to do is go out on long walks in the country? I was teasing her, and going on and on and she said, "Sod it, I've had enough of this," and she picked up my glass and threw my wine out of the window. It was very expensive red wine. She knew she'd get away with it. And she did. I still tease her from time to time, but now I know when to stop.

She's very interested in Africa, and although I lived in Nigeria until I was 13, she seems to know more about it than I do. A few years ago, she had an exhibition of bushman art and she brought some of the artists over from Botswana, and she went round for lunch in Kew with a friend of hers, and she brought along these 12 bush people, and then they went for a walk in Kew Gardens. I thought that was quite wacky, taking 12 Kalahari bushmen to Kew Gardens.

REBECCA HOSSACK: I met Victor at a dinner party of a mutual friend of ours, Max, about four years ago, and the thing that attracted me about him was that he reminded me of my favourite sculpture in the whole world, a statue by Jacob Epstein of Adam which is in the hall at Harewood House. It's an incredible statue and it looks just like Victor. But I didn't say that to him, because I thought he might not know Epstein's work. We got chatting, mainly because I wanted to sit and look at him. He told me he had been to Australia in 1990 and he'd been bored in Sydney, and I thought, "How on earth can you be bored in Sydney?" But because he was bored he'd gone to see the opera house, and he'd never been to the opera before, and he went to see *La Bohème*, performed by the Australian Opera, and I thought, there's more to this rugby player than meets the eye. At first I hadn't thought that Victor and I would have much in common, but I began to see more of him through Max, and so Victor and I became better and better friends. We have quite a lot in common in some ways – we are both very driven, partly because we had very motivating fathers, and then we both come to England from hot countries, and have had to make our way. I think he has the gift of life. Some people blame their parents for how they are, but although Victor had quite a difficult childhood he's not at all resentful. His mother died when he was only four, and he didn't see his father until he was eight, so Victor was brought up by his grandmother and aunt. And he's very good friends with his Dad now; there's no resentment. I think people

I have hopes for him on that front. One thing we do really like is opera, and although he likes Puccini and all that, I want to take him to things like *The Cunning Little Vixen* and Harrison Birtwistle's new work, *The Second Mrs Kong*. So I suppose in some ways I'm his mentor when it comes to opera, although I don't want him to start mentoring me with sport.

I didn't watch the Rugby World Cup – in fact I put the telly out in the hall. Victor knows I take him for Victor, and not because of his rugby; I've got no idea whether he's a star or a complete failure. When I meet him for dinner at 8.30pm, the evening just goes like that – suddenly it's 12. I like his new bar a lot, but I don't really like having dinner with him there, because he's "on duty" and doesn't pay me enough attention. The last time I was there with him, I went off to the loo, and when I came back, he was sitting

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at a completely different table with a whole lot of girls.

I think he's a bit too keen for everyone to like him; I think he shouldn't try too hard to please; he should realise that not everyone will like him. And I hate his dress sense – it's too flash, he wears nothing but Versace. He's got this really flash car too – a yellow Lotus. I don't like that at all. But there isn't much I don't like about him. He does talk about himself quite a lot, and sometimes when I'm telling him something about myself, I catch his eyes glazing over and I say: "Victor, pay attention!"

Most of my friends are in the art world, or they're writers, and Victor takes me out of my milieu and puts me back in touch with myself; with the person who arrived here from Australia and used to hang around with footballers. We have little in common, but we have an awful lot to say to each other. It's quite exciting when I go out with him, because people look at us the whole time; we do look quite odd together. I really like going to the

would say we're both gregarious because we're both hosts professionally, although we're both loners deep down. In some ways, it's quite a funny sort of relationship, but I really do feel I know him very well. Often I'll just think of him, and then he'll ring out of the blue five minutes later. When I talk to Victor I feel really confident, probably because he doesn't worry and he has no angst, whereas I can be a worrier. When it comes to business, he's got a real killer instinct, and I think that comes from having to make it on his own. I wouldn't like to comment on his art collection, but let's just say that

opera with him and seeing people looking at us in the bar – you can almost hear them wondering, how can these two be friends?

I think the fact that he's from Africa attracts me to him, and I always ask him to tell me more about his childhood and what he remembers from Nigeria. I keep telling him what I know about the country, and he says he doesn't know anything about it because he hasn't been back at all. If I didn't see him I'd miss his face. I could look at it for hours. It never looks discontented. That's what I'd miss if I didn't see him. His lovely face. □