It was the first day of graded speeches in Public Speaking 101. Scott, the football team captain and a 4.0 student, was nearing the end of his speech on the use of steroids in high school athletics. He efficiently reviewed his main points and concluded his speech with a poignant story about a teenager who died because he wanted to play football as best as he possibly could, even if that meant taking drugs to do so.

“…Jason Robinson died in pursuit of excellence. There is no need for other youngsters to follow in his footsteps to an early grave.”

His words ended on a quiet note and his classmates tentatively began to applaud before breaking out into a loud ovation. Breathing a sigh of relief, Scott gathered his note cards from the podium and began walking back to his desk in the third row of the classroom. His classmates were obviously impressed.

“Way to go, man! Where’d you learn to talk like that?”

“Geez, I’m glad I don’t have to go next.”

“Was that a true story or did you just make it all up!”

I asked the students to write down their comments on Scott’s presentation while I finished writing my own evaluation. A couple of minutes passed and students began talking among themselves. I checked my sign-up sheet to see who would be delivering the next speech. It was Lisa. My heart went out to the timid girl sitting two seats away from me. Lisa had registered for my section of Public Speaking 101 last semester, but had dropped it before she had to make any oral presentations in the class. I knew she was nervous probably more so than any of the other students. As she dropped her stack of 4x6 note cards and busily tried to reorganize them, a niggling little voice spoke in my mind. “Maybe you should have touched base with her last week to see if she was ready for the assignment.” And then the voice of reason and practicality spoke up, “You don’t have time to spoon feed every scared student.”

“OK, Lisa. You’re up next,” I said in what I hoped was an encouraging tone of voice. A petite, blonde girl wearing wire-rimmed glasses and clasping note cards, stood, took a few audible gulps of air, and walked toward the front of the classroom. Twenty-seven pairs of eyes looked in her direction. Lisa cleared her throat and placed the note cards on the podium as the class had been instructed to do. Her hands immediately grabbed onto the edge of the podium in a white-knuckled, death grip. A flush slowly inched its way from her chest to her throat. As her cheeks turned a blotchy, fire-engine red, she cleared her throat again and began to talk in a faltering, timid voice.
“My speech is on...why children who commit violent crimes...should be tried as adults in the court system,” she stumbled. “There are three reasons why children who commit violent crimes should have to face adult penalties for their actions...”

Lisa got off to a rough start. “How many times had I told the class not to introduce a speech with my speech is on or today I want to talk about,” I asked myself. “Where was the clever attention getter no speech should be without?’

She continued, “The first reason why children who commit violent crimes should be tried as adults is because...” Lisa fumbled through her preview. As she arranged her note cards, one fell off the podium and slid under a nearby desk. No one else seemed to notice – except Lisa. She appeared to freeze in time as she apparently wondered whether to retrieve the card or try to continue without it. Her eyes looked scared and wild, like an animal caught by surprise in car headlights on a dark road...Several seconds passed before Lisa decided what to do...As she stepped out from behind the podium she bumped into it and the rest of the cards fluttered to the floor. That mishap was the proverbial last straw. With a dumbstruck expression on her face, Lisa abandoned her search for the lost note card, turned, and ran out of the room. Tears of frustration and embarrassment already stained her blotchy cheeks. The classroom was uncomfortably quiet except for the haunting sound of Lisa’s footsteps running down the tile hallway. With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I looked away from the empty doorway and faced twenty-seven pairs of eyes looking at me.

1. What might have caused Lisa to feel/react the way she did?
2. Pretend you were one of her classmates, how would you have felt?
3. What was the instructor’s reaction? How could s/he have prevented Lisa from “falling apart?”
4. What could Lisa have done to prevent reacting the way she did?
5. What advice can you give Lisa to help her prepare for the next speech assignment?
6. How can the instructor and/or the students show support for Lisa when she returns to class?